



**PHD**

## **Navigating Creative Work**

### **Work, self, and emotions in the creative organisation**

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# Navigating Creative Work

*Work, self, and emotions in the creative organisation*

Iva Josefsson

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath  
School of Management  
October 2017

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This thesis examines the experiences of creative workers working in a creative organisation. It considers how workers understand themselves, their work, the challenges they face, and their attempts to navigate these. This is achieved through an organisational ethnography at a single organisation, Alpha Games.

By examining worker narratives and organisational texts at Alpha I observe how discourses are constructed that regulate who and what is the ideal Alpha worker, but also worker selves and emotions. At Alpha, such discourses were linked to wider social ideologies of creativity and autonomy to generate fantasies of the prized artist. While workers engaged with these fantasies in their talk – they often failed to realise these in their everyday experiences of work. Despite this contradiction, workers continued to express a love for their work and construct themselves as a part of it. I argue that this complication of self and emotions in work is due to structural configurations that organise creative work as a game with the self. The way in which work is structurally connected to the self encourages workers to engage in this Game with the hopes of affirming identities and reaching desired loving states.

Despite the aspirations and desires it triggers, this Game more often results in painful experiences and insecurity that heighten the sense of self. In hoping to cope with these challenges workers develop an alternative discourse and identity of the craftsman. Through the craftsman they work to navigate these challenges and avoid difficult emotion work without, however, challenging systemic issues of long working hours, low pay, and the blurring of life and work. This thesis concludes by considering the implication of these issues more broadly in order to raise questions about the ways in which creative work is organised.

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Iva

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# 1. Introduction

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Creative workers are considered some of the most privileged workers of our late-modern society. Their privilege rests on creative work's alluring promise of self-expression, autonomy, and self-actualisation; where work has the chance to be experienced as fulfilling and meaningful (Banks, 2007; Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 1998; Taylor, 2010). These promises paint an attractive picture for the millions of workers drawn to a variety of creative fields and creative organisations. Consumers and capitalists alike devour all that is creative and its promises of productivity, wealth, innovation and the 'new', propelling further this positivity and buzz around creative work and creative workers (Negus and Pickering, 2000). Yet this all-too-rosy impression runs the danger of glossing over the fine-grain and darker details in the experiences of creative workers. If we examine closer some of the stories and experiences of creative workers, we begin to see that this glamorous narrative may be little more than a dazzling but thin veil for a variety of challenges and difficulties. These experiences address a darker side to creative work, one that all the allure of creativity cannot fully disguise and one that should be incorporated into our understandings of creative work.

Creative workers have been all too well documented as operating at the extremes of work's precarity – under insecure employment conditions, low incomes, long working hours and under demands that ensure a blurring between work and life (Christopherson, 2008; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Murray and Gollmitzer, 2012; De Peuter, 2014; Ross, 2008; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). The articulations of such experiences by creative workers are not simply clustered and localised phenomena, but rather reflect a growing counter narrative that changes our views on the landscape of contemporary work (Neilson and Coté, 2014). These new narratives reveal the 'hidden injuries' inflicted on creative workers by the aspirations and promises that organise creative work as well as the capitalistic interests that underline them and retain a tight control over creative workers (Morgan and Wood, 2014). The societal arrangement of creative work also presents itself in what has been labelled by proponents of this new order of creativity as the '*Warhol economy*', a place where the cultural entrepreneur is the modern day working hero and where the efficiency of a network model of work organisation is favoured over job and income security (De Peuter, 2014). While these optimistic accounts propel views of the individual as heroic and agentic, they fail to make any serious attempts to address that working in these



creative ‘havens’ could possibly be experienced as ‘exploitative, oppressive, or exclusionary’ (Peuter, 2014, p. 32). Adding to this problematic neglect is a lack of questioning of the ways in which creative work is currently organised and the potential negative impact this may have on employees working in creative organisations and their well-being.

A great deal of academic interest has been paid to those working in highly precarious positions in the creative industries – more specifically, the freelancer or contract worker (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, 2011; Randle and Culkin, 2009; Rowlands and Handy, 2012; Ursell, 2000), or the aspirant or self-employed (Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; McRobbie, 1998; Taylor, 2015; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). Yet many creative organisations employ workers on full employment terms with stable income and a good amount of job security. Furthermore, the organisational aspects of creative work are underrepresented in research on creative workers’ experiences (Banks, 2007) but may work to colour our understanding between the private experiences and the public issues facing creative workers and creative work. After all, as Rose puts it, ‘organizations have come to fill the place between the ‘private’ lives of citizens and the ‘public’ concerns of rulers’ (Rose, 1989, p. 2). In particular, Rose argues for the fact that organisations are an important link in understanding the relations between the broader societal structures and the subjective lives of individuals – even down to our experiences, our affect, beliefs and aspirations (Rose, 1989). The connection here is an important one, organisations are structures that mimic broader societal concerns and discourses. In our current late-capitalistic society these concerns seem to prioritise production and wealth, as well as consumer interests, and organisations tend to reflect these through managerial interests and management techniques (Hanlon, 2017). Studying organisations, therefore, offers a suitable medium for understanding the experiences of workers and relating these to broader concerns and ideas about society as well as contemporary work.

Given the potential value of studying organisations, it is surprising to find that there is significant dearth in the study of creative organisations with Hesmondhalgh (2007) highlighting the considerable ‘lack of empirical attention to what happens in cultural industry organisations’ (p. 37) and Banks (2007) stating that we know very little about creative enterprises and how they are internally organised. This situation does not appear to have improved much in the last decade either with Thompson, Parker, and Cox (2016) commenting on the ‘excess of high theory over detailed empirical accounts of

actual creative labour in specific creative industries’ (p. 2). Of the few studies with considerable depth of empirical material (cf. Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Taylor and Littleton, 2013; Brouillette, 2014) there is consistent emphasis on identity, self and affect as playing an important part in creative work. In their study of the media industry, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) reveal with great detail the conditions of work in media production but also the respective experiences of creative workers. They use these empirical insights to theorise and argue for what might be deemed ‘good’ and ‘bad’ creative work. In particular, their findings showed that creative workers express a strong attachment to their work and are required to carry out considerable emotion work in their everyday work experiences. Taylor and Littleton (2013) explore the identity construction of creative aspirants and novices and note that these constructions are often fragile and complex, often shaped by ‘meanings current in the wider socio-historic context, and also more local meanings and associations encountered within particular environments and coloured by the affective associations given by personal history’ (p. 128). Brouillette (2014) addresses these broader meanings by tackling more ‘socially responsive conceptions of the creative self’ (p. 4). Through such conceptions Brouillette is able to successfully speak of the neoliberal rhetoric that governs much of contemporary work. She does this by engaging with the writers’ narratives of their experiences in the hopes of unravelling the complex interactions between rhetoric and experience. In doing so she is able to address the interaction of these distinct levels - or connect private issues with public matters through a rich and thoughtful analysis.

Returning to the creative organisation, it is perhaps owing to these existing studies that our interest in understanding how selves, emotions and work become wrapped up in aspects of organisation is heightened. In the wake of much interest in creative work either being positioned from the perspective of worker experiences *or* the industry/sociological perspective, it becomes necessary to address the interactions of these two at an appropriate site where their interaction becomes observable – namely at the organisational level. At this level, research endeavours to make sense of how individuals interact with organisational discourses that structure and govern their work and experiences. This point is further emphasised by Bourdieu’s (1993) writing on cultural production where he stresses the importance of considering the structural dynamics at play when examining creative activity and not ignoring the socio-political context of its construction. This sentiment is echoed by Susan Christopherson (2008) in her examination of media workers and their creative environments – she argues that

understanding the relation between workers and their surrounds can give depths to the ‘social and psychological dimensions of creative work’ (p. 75) and move beyond the simple and positive image of creative individual as self-enterprising. More importantly here she notes that ‘worker identity and the work process itself changes in conjunction with the strategies of firms and organizations in the creative industries’ (p. 92). Her preliminary analysis of these interactions, however, leaves considerable room to develop understandings and give voice to workers in these contexts. Furthermore, dominant discourses and narratives in organisations tend to reflect managerial interests. Identifying and addressing these allows for the questioning and challenging of the ways in which creative work is currently organised and experienced - while providing the opportunity for alternative ways to organising creative work to be considered.

Further still, with perhaps the biggest contribution to make to our understanding of the lives and organisation of creative workers and creative work is to examine how workers not only experience but navigate the competing narratives and discourses of creative work. Therefore, an important question raised, and attempted to be answered by this research, is – how do creative workers experience and navigate themselves and their work in a creative organisation? Answering this question is accompanied by a secondary aim of this thesis which is to attempt to uncover challenges faced by contemporary creative workers and examine what the experience of these challenges tell us about how creative work is organised.

This second aim has a particular focus and concern for workers’ well-being. While any issue that threatens worker well-being is concerning, it is important to note that I do not position workers as simply subject to the structures and systems they are a part of but rather acknowledge a space for agency, creativity and ambiguity in their relations to these structures. Since I see structures – discourses, organisation, institutions etcetera - not as fixed but rather fluid, contested, and socially constructed. It is possible to theorise, from this perspective, that workers are able to affect these structures through their interactions in everyday life. As such, this thesis takes the standpoint that workers construct and reinforce these structures while simultaneously being shaped by them. Due to an agency (albeit not unlimited), I argue that individuals are able to shift and change these structures through their discursive practices. In these navigating attempts, people ‘sense and dynamically negotiate their own and others’ goals, actions, expectations, needs and feelings’ (Iedema, Rhodes, and Sheeres, 2006, p. 1112). I consider these navigating activities as neither fully attributable to structural dimensions or to the

individual, but are rather a complex interaction between the two. It is through these navigating activities that selves are constructed in ways that are neither predictable or inherent (Iedema et al., 2006), but become understandable through the contrasting of these micro-activities with more stable appearing structures.

Discourse as theory and method is one means through which we can get a better understanding of organisational life. Discourse as constituted by language and its use has multiple means for revealing aspects of organisational life. For example, discourse as texts produced in everyday life and research interview settings are used to generate meanings and develop understanding (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, and Putnam, 2004). Paying attention to, as well as decoding and analysing, these texts can reveal broader discourses and the organisation of the social, especially when examined in the context of these 'structures' (Grant et al., 2004). Discourse-as-structures, alternatively, are 'articulated, negotiated and deployed to organize and pursue practical interests as well as reproduce relatively stable, sedimented social resources in interaction' (Broadfoot, Deetz, and Anderson, 2004, p. 194). While these discursive structures often appear stable – especially if examined across long periods of time, at the micro-level of analysis we can see how these are negotiated and contested and never fixed but rather mutable by individuals (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Applying a Foucauldian understanding we can also see how these discourses are a constitution of power that 'disciplines the body, regulates the mind, and orders the emotions' (Clegg, 1994, p. 277) and thereby setting the boundaries of the possible. Discourses compete to become the dominant resources that guide behaviour and meaning but do not become fixity in their domination but are challenged by counter-discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In such ways, I maintain that individuals are not mere subjects of discourse but navigate the multiple and competing discourses, appropriating some and resisting others in the construction of their own meanings and their sense of self.

These 'projects of the self' are caught up in the conditions of our late-modern times (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991). Needing to 'become' a self is an experience that constitutes our everyday lives, and work is one primary technology through which we seek to achieve this (Rose, 1989, 1998). Therefore, in studying creative workers we can understand how discourses produce and govern creative working selves but also how individuals work to manoeuvre and make use of various competing meanings and resources. Figuring this out cannot be reduced to simply looking at the grander scheme

of social relations in the hopes of revealing the workings of these relations. Rather it involves examining the minor engagements in the everyday which are:

*cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with here and now, not with some fantasized future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental (Rose, 1999, p. 280).*

In examining these articulations and utterances in the everyday of a creative organisation, we can come to understand how these micro occurrences and texts interact with broader social level but also how these two conceptual levels relate and organise each other. To understand this interaction well requires the careful study of the goings on in an organisation and the attentive collection of experiences and meanings constructed by workers coupled with the fastidious working through (headwork) and arrangement (textwork) of the material from the field (Van Maanen, 1988, 2011). This calls for a well-orchestrated organisational ethnography that gets to the root of the question ‘what is going on in the creative organisation?’.

In order to begin addressing this question an appropriate site for exploring creative work must be selected. Creative work defined as the production of goods and services that are largely valued on their symbolic or aesthetic qualities (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) and creative work organisations being defined as those for whom such products are the focus, allows us to narrow in on the sites of creative work. One group of creative workers, perhaps most caught up in increasing changes of labour caused by technology are digital workers. The digitalisation of labour has been said to play an important role in changing conditions and experiences of work (Berardi, 2009; Colbert, Yee, and George, 2016; Dyer Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2014). Digital creative workers, defined here as those that work predominantly with technologies to produce creative goods, reflect an area of work that is profoundly changing the way we experience work, but also life. The issues facing these workers was highlighted in a special issue of the journal *Ephemera* on the topic of digital labour. In the editorial welcome to the issue the guest editors comment on the effects of digital media technologies - stressing that they have ‘altered every aspect of our lives, their effects are far too vast to ever be fully measured or assessed’ (Burston, Dyer-Witheford, and Hearn, 2010, p. 214) leading them to raise the questions:

*‘what are the implications of these changes in the very definitions of what constitutes ‘work’ and in the parameters of the workplace? What are the implications for our senses of selfhood, our political agency as citizens, and our creative freedom as artists and innovators? Finally, how might we see these changes wrought by digital technology as potentially politically productive or liberatory?’ (p. 215).*

I find these questions a particularly good starting point to narrow in on a creative organisation that is an appropriate site for understanding contemporary workplaces where digital creative work is carried out. As basis for locating this ethnographic study I examined the nations that place considerable emphasis on both creative work and digital labour. One such nation is Sweden - for which the creative industries account for almost five percent of GDP (Nielsén, 2008). Sweden is also bedrock to a rich cultural life which contributes to the development of the creative industries (Nielsén, 2008). A dissection of the Swedish interactive media production industry by Movitz and Sandberg (2009) illustrates how the organisation of creativity is a central concern for many of these companies. As such, Swedish interactive media organisations reflect the complexities and challenges faced by creative workers in creative work organisations (Movitz and Sandberg, 2009). Of the media industries, Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter (2003) in their book *Digital Play* argue for video game production as an interesting site for exploring the interaction of contemporary managerial interests and worker experiences that fail to live up to the ‘rose-coloured post-industrial visions of knowledge work’ (p. 201) - calling for a more thorough and sociologically considerate approach to the study of these contexts.

### ***The Case of Alpha Games***

Alpha Games (Alpha)<sup>1</sup> is a video game development studio located in Stockholm, Sweden. At the time of this study Alpha employed over 300 employees to work across several game projects. These projects varied from large blockbuster games, small games for mobile devices, to gameplay hardware and infrastructure. Each project was commissioned by Alpha’s owners – Grassroots, a large video game publisher and owner

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all names of organisations and individuals in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

of a global network of video game production studios. Grassroots purchased Alpha in 2008 hoping to grow their business through the acquisition of small established studios. This was not an entirely new experience at Alpha, the studio had previously been owned by several other publishing companies following their modest development from small independent studio in the late nineties.

According to an EY report released in 2015 on the state of the cultural and creative industries, video game production employed over 600,000 employees globally in 2013. Of these employees, the majority work with the practices that are fairly institutionalised across the video game development industry (Kerr, 2006; Thompson et al., 2016). These include the organisation of work into projects and by the specialisation of skills. Video game development projects usually follow a production cycle of design, pre-production, production, publishing, distribution, and retail (Kerr, 2006). Of these stages, half were conducted at Alpha, with development and design of new game ideas produced at Alpha to be then pitched to Grassroots for resource and financial backing. Pre-production and production would then be carried out at Alpha (with support from other Grassroots studios if and when required). Aspects of publishing, distribution and retail in the production cycle were then taken care of by Grassroots - who managed these on a global scale.

Once a game idea received the go-ahead from the top-tier of Grassroots' creative team, work would be organised by Alpha around the project. Each project broke tasks down and assigned them to specialised workers. Some of the job roles carried out by these specialised workers would for example include producer, computer programmer, technical artist, graphic artist, systems developer, level designer, and sound or music engineer. At the beginning of each project the number of people working on it was small and made up of only a core group of specialists. As projects grew, specialists would be grouped into teams with each team being led by a team 'lead' who would manage the team and make sure each member worked according to the project vision and deadlines. These leads reported to producers and group of senior creatives that were responsible for setting the direction for the project and overseeing that things were completed within desired specifications and timelines. Major projects required that the project was led by a creative director. The creative director's job was to set and drive the creative vision for the game. This creative director then reported to the studio head who was the main responsible for the entire studio and held primary accountability to Grassroots. Much of this organisational structure at Alpha did not differ significantly from other accounts of

video game studios (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar, 2008; O'Donnell, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016; Tschang, 2007).

From an organisational culture perspective, creativity and creative work was at the heart of Alpha's culture – with the organisation making it clear on their website that “*creativity is key*”. In many ways the organisation also tried to embody the ‘cool’ and egalitarian ideals found in many contemporary workplaces, and in particular the new media industries (Gill, 2002). The embracing of a relaxed work environment and dress code, pool tables, game console areas, loud décor and plenty of cool parties and events organised at the office gave the impression of Alpha as a generally ‘fun’ place to work. In my discussions with individuals it also became clear that the organisation was at times experienced as a ‘flat’ hierarchy, where the top-tier of managers were open and encouraging towards individuals approaching them with their ideas. Interestingly, however, despite the positivity of this ideal I found some contradictions in how workers experienced the organisation and its culture. Not all who I spoke with experienced Alpha as a friendly, charming and open environment. Some maintained that consoles and play areas were hardly used and that hierarchy remained to the extent that approaching those with power at later stages of the project was met with rejection which ultimately tempered their resolve to do so.

While Alpha attempts to develop a culture that lives up to contemporary ideals of work, these counter-narratives illustrate that working in these creative organisations is much more complex and political. Such a landscape, supported by the view of these new media workers as ‘representing the future of work’ (Gill, 2002, p. 72), calls for the closer examination of how creative work is experienced and organised in a creative organisation and its potential for revealing more about socio-political negotiations of contemporary work.

### ***Looking Forward***

This research thesis is organised into ten chapters. The next chapter examines what is meant by the term ‘creative work’. Creative work can be explored from various perspectives - dependent on the way the concept is defined. It also overlaps with several other frequently cited labels, namely cultural work, digital work and knowledge work. Settling these distinctions, the chapter then explores some of the more dominant



discourses that emerge from the extant literature on creative work as well as the challenges that these discourses extend to the understanding of the concept.

Chapter three looks at experiences and constructions of a sense of self as well as how this construction occurs through the use of language and the involvement of emotions – as well as the rewarding and sometimes troubling outcomes of these. The chapter then explores the existing theories of how selves are constructed in the context of the work organisations and reviews several detailed accounts of selves at work. Inspired by the literature the chapter then develops several images of contemporary creative worker. These images exemplify some of the resources available to workers when navigating their work. Ultimately the chapter concludes that selves are often entangled in the political and power laden structures that organise work.

Chapter four addresses the development of this study. Guided by the interest in studying selves and their interaction with the broader structures that construct and organise them in the creative organisation, the chapter discusses the parameters of this ethnographic research project. It recalls processes around fieldwork and decisions that lead to the production of this final piece of work. Conclusively it attends to two aspects of research, namely van Maanen's (1988, 2011) concepts of *headwork* (theorizing) and *textwork* (writing). Using these concepts, it explores the ideas that laid the foundation for this final text.

Chapter five introduces us to the dominant ideologies shared at Alpha and contrasts these to the experiences and conditions of work. This first empirical chapter sees Alpha as a place where the individual is highly prized – with the organisation valuing autonomy, ownership and agency of workers; while also encouraging fantasies of a great and heroic artist. While this prized individual is constructed at the heart of the organisation, workers share with me rather contradictory experiences of work – of a loss of a familial working culture, demands for long working hours, and of the increasing standardisation of work.

Exploring this contradiction between fantasies and everyday realities of creative work at Alpha, the next chapter seeks to examine why feelings of love for work are expressed by workers despite these ongoing tensions. The chapter unravels the 'love for work' narrative by examining different possible interpretations for a love for one's work. One interpretation of this love for work leads to the exploration of love as blinding, which allows workers to better cope with the mundane experiences of work. Another possible interpretation of this phenomenon is of love being without reason or for the

purely pleasurable experience that is described as being in ‘flow’. Ultimately however each of these leads to constructions of the experiencing self as being part of a transcendence and movement towards idealised states.

The promise of this transcendence or salvation through creative work and constructing the self and its identities is explored in the following chapter. More specifically it considers the organisational dynamics and structures that connect the self with creative work. It presents these as a game where players (workers), through aspirations, signatures and specific platforms attempt to align and have themselves affirmed in aspirational identities by others. While some succeed in this pursuit, a vast majority do not – resulting in the experience of feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, and pain. In trying to navigate these challenging feelings, workers attempt to reduce these difficult emotions by identifying with a less illusive aspirational identity and one less reliant on affirmation from others – that of the craftsman.

The eighth chapter in this manuscript delves into the theoretical aspects of the Game. Theoretically, the Game is developed as one that is largely socio-political, and played with the desires to be affirmed in the aspirational identities and selves proscribed under the construct of the ‘ideal Alpha worker’. This gameplay, however, results in complex and often less than ideal outcomes for workers. While a few workers experience and express feelings of love resulting from having their aspired-to-identities affirmed through their work, for others the Game induces insecurity, ambivalence, but also difficult and painful emotions. Lastly, the Game encourages a salience of the self, so that individuals become more self-aware. This salience and the involvement in these affectual relations cause a collapsing of the self into work which makes distancing and self-management less observable.

Having explored the systemic and structural dimensions to the way that creative work is organised at Alpha, the next chapter positions these structures within the existing theories on affectual relations at work. More specifically it discusses how the entanglement of self and emotions to work through the Game may serve managerial interests. Yet individuals are not simply subjects of structural dimensions but attempt to navigate and manoeuvre their selves in light of the Game. Opportunities for micro-resistance and seeking ways to cope with difficult feelings sees some individuals draw on alternative discourses and identities of creative work. The alternative of the ‘craftsman’ identity as opposed to the ‘artist’ seeks to diminish some of the pressures of the contested and subjective means through which their work is evaluated. The

development of this alternative is suggested as a possible way in which individuals navigate the socio-political terrain of creative work at Alpha. Yet the question remains whether this really is resisting the Game or another means through which self and emotions are further complicated in work, while conditions of work remain unchallenged.

Finally, the thesis concludes by reflecting on this study and what it offers to our understanding of creative work, creative workers, and contemporary work more broadly. It seeks to challenge the idealistic views of creative work and argues that creative work in the creative organisation offers many challenges for workers. Discourses of work ideals appear to motivate individuals as well as involve their emotions in work, in particular 'love' - which for the most part sits in contradiction to everyday work experiences. In addition, the demands of selves and emotions in and through creative work, organised as it is in Alpha, proves difficult for many workers which threatens their well-being. Micro-resistance to socio-political games and the adoption of the alternative identity of the craftsman may be useful in improving employee sense of well-being, but is unlikely to challenge conditions of work. Greater worker awareness of the structures that organise their work and a healthy dose of self-distancing may be necessary.

Ultimately this work seeks to explore the questions surrounding worker experiences of work and selves in the creative organisation. Aspects of which, through this analysis, are revealed as problematic but could do more to address contemporary issues on work, self and emotions in organisations. This work is a specific analysis of a single case but seeks to speak to the broader discourses and understandings of creative work. It is through the careful attention to the experiences of creative workers and the conditions and discourses that construct them that we can establish a way forward towards new possibilities for creative work.

## 2. Understanding Creative Work

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This chapter addresses the existing understandings of the concept of ‘creative work’. There is a burgeoning interest in researching and theorising the ‘cultural’ or ‘creative’ economy. Workers taking part in this ‘new economy’ are arguably ‘one group of workers said perhaps more than any other to symbolize contemporary transformations of work’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 2). These kind of claims raise the questions - who are these workers and what exactly are they doing? In an attempt to address these questions, this chapter will first explore the concepts of ‘creativity’ and ‘work’ independently before looking into what they offer when brought together under the term ‘creative work’. The chapter will then look at how this term is distinguished from other categorisations of work such as ‘immaterial labour’, ‘knowledge work’ and ‘emotional labour’ which are often used in close relation to the term ‘creative work’. Following this, the chapter will explore the contexts where creative work is said to take place. Reference to the ‘creative industries’ is common, but little agreement is held about its definition and the kind of work the term includes (Banks and O’Connor, 2009; Jones, Lorenzen, and Sapsed, 2015; O’Connor, 2009; Smith and McKinlay, 2009). In much of the existing creative industries research there is significant interest in studying workers that are marginalised or struggling to position themselves in this highly precarious labour market, with many studies covering experiences of aspirants, freelancers, and self-employed creative workers. Amongst this research there is only a limited number of studies exploring creative work in a creative work organisation, where the structuring of work practices inspired by managerial initiatives and dominant discourses may be particularly meaningful for the contemporary creative worker. Lastly, this chapter will explore some of the dominant discourses of creative work found in the existing literature in order to develop our understandings of the ways in which creative work may be organised in the creative organisation.

### *Conceptualising Creative Work*

In making sense of ‘creative work’ it is necessary to start with narrowing in on the equally complex and difficult concepts of ‘creativity’ and ‘work’. Each of these has a multitude of meanings and uses in scholarly work. I will therefore start this chapter by setting some limits to how these concepts are used in this thesis.

## **The concept of creativity**

The concept of creativity has intrigued mankind for centuries. It is positioned as a source for novelty, innovation and rejuvenation (Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou, 2014). Yet, conceptually speaking there has been little consensus across different scholarly fields about its definition, and even less regarding how exactly we might go about studying it (Negus and Pickering, 2000). This particularly slippery concept has nonetheless been at the heart of much academic interest across the social science disciplines. If we begin with a dictionary definition of creativity it is defined as ‘the use of imagination or original ideas to create something new’ (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2017). This definition does little to alleviate the debates surrounding creativity - least of all because it omits the subject(s) who uses the imagination or original ideas - something that has been questioned for decades by creativity researchers. From a psychological perspective, creativity has been linked to characteristics and abilities of individuals (Dellas and Gaier, 1970; Guilford, 1950; Kaufman and Sternberg, 2015). Criticism of a rather narrow and essentialist view of creativity provided the bedrock for the shift towards a more social approach to the study of creativity (Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003). Such social approaches have addressed creativity as a practical accomplishment occurring between individuals and groups, rather than as a simple quality of a single individual (Anderson et al., 2014). This social perspective advocates studies of creativity that explore the practices and processes that individuals engage in when producing works that are deemed creative. What is deemed creative, however, is difficult to determine objectively with much disagreement arising over ways to quantify what is or is not creative or ‘creativity’. Such controversy makes it necessary to acknowledge creativity’s subjective dimension (Amabile, 1982) – that what we deem as creative is a social construction, rather than any stable, quantifiable or fixed notion.

Creativity is thus not a simple but complex concept that requires us to examine the intersubjective construction as well as the experienced and negotiated understandings of the concept. Negus and Pickering (2000) point out that ‘the attribution of ‘creative’ to a social activity or humanly produced artefact necessarily entails value judgement’ which establishes the ‘need to consider the changing circumstances within which certain creative labels and attributions (and not others) become possible, and the consequences of this for the evaluative process itself’ (p. 261). In addition to the necessity for understanding the evaluative process, the contested nature of what is ‘creative’ or ‘creativity’ means we need to explore the multiple meanings derived and

their implications for individuals and the broader social milieu. Exploring creativity as a discourse, which is here understood as a system for the ‘formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, p. 1126), then, compels us to examine creativity from its socio-cultural dimensions as well as the contexts in which it is constructed. In particular, examining creativity in its everyday construction and re-construction of meanings of creativity allows us to develop a rich understanding of the concept, its use, and the accompanying implications of such articulatory accomplishments (Jeanes, 2006; Prichard, 2002). While this discourse-as-structure view implies that some dominant definitions and meanings prevail, examining individual’s interactions with discourses of creativity allows us to understand the micro-construction of meanings – both their appropriation and redefinition in everyday accounts (Fairclough, 1995; Grant et al., 2004). The approach of this thesis, therefore, is to address the concept of creativity as a social construction. However, for the purposes of definition within this research I acknowledge the privileging of certain meanings of creativity that allow us to narrow the scope of those studied. More specifically, creativity that is defined as relating to the novel, symbolic as well as aesthetic dimensions of work and works is used for distinguishing and defining creative work in the following sections.

### **The concept of work**

Addressing the concept of work and its definition offers a better understanding on what is and is not included in the study of creative ‘work’. Work is yet another concept that has been troubling many researchers for decades if not centuries. Work is predominantly considered an activity, one which in many cases enables our survival but also offers gains beyond it (Anthony, 1977; Meakin, 1976). The concept of work has an elaborate historical and cultural political basis - one which, if examined closely, is hegemonic in the understandings of humanity and life (Anthony, 1977). Work as an activity exchanged for money or goods has continued to dominate our definitions, particularly in the current late capitalistic societies. These views originate in historic accounts of ‘labour’ such as those of Marx, which construct work as an activity to be traded in processes of labour in exchange for wages or income (Marx, [1844] 1992). This relation to the monetary and capitalistic interests is a way to distinguish between forms of paid and un-paid work. Another possibility of honing in on work is to explore it in a dialectic to non-work activities. In particular Fleming (2014) contrasts paid work activity to that which he

considers not work, namely life. His argument, however, challenges this binary view of life and work as he suggests that the boundaries between life and work are now essentially blurred, especially against the backdrop of contemporary capitalism.

Another challenge to its definition is that the word ‘work’ is both a noun and a verb. It describes an activity orientated towards a purpose (*n. work*), the outcome of such activity (*n. works*), as well as the process(es) through which such activity occurs (*v. to work*) (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2017). As I use all three understandings of the term throughout the thesis, I want to focus on defining the noun of work, which unlike the other two forms is less self-evident from the context of its use. While voluntary and non-paid work is a growing area of interest in the study of work (O’Toole and Grey, 2016a, 2016b), in this thesis I will address work as the activity carried out as a part of paid employment – at and outside of formal workplaces. Paid work is of specific interest because of its problematic nature as it is ‘performed in the shadow of capital accumulation’ (Ransome, 2005, p. 16) and where people ‘continue to be prepared to participate in it despite the inconveniences it involves’ (p. 17). Such complications make it interesting to examine issues in contemporary employment relations but also the sites and conditions of paid work. For these reasons I will refer to the noun of work, from here on in, as the activities carried out as a part of employment and/or for purposes of attaining income. The exchange of activity for wages or income then implies that work and labour, under the workings here, are essentially exchangeable terms that refer to the same idea.

### **Defining creative work**

Combining the concepts of creativity and work, as outlined above, does not directly equate to a clear definition of the concept of ‘creative work’. This is mostly so due to the multitude of meanings of the term ‘creativity’, but also due to the variety of sites and ways it is claimed such work can be carried out. Extending from the definition of work, I see the terms ‘creative work’ and ‘creative labour’ as synonyms that describe the same phenomenon addressed in this thesis. This is quite similar in the ways to Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s (2011) well worked definition of creative work (labour as they call it) as referring to ‘those jobs, centred on the activity of symbol-making, which are to be found in large numbers in the cultural industries’ (p. 9). As such I do not stray too far from this definition in drawing the boundaries of the study of creative work. Similar to them I also address creative work as activity which relies on interpretive knowledge, but can also

be distinguished in terms of its products, that is by the largely symbolic and aesthetic qualities of that which is produced. Similar to Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) observation I have also found that a great number of other types of 'work' and 'labour' are often positioned in proximity to creative work, these include cultural work/labour, immaterial labour, intellectual and cognitive labour, affective and emotional labour, as well as knowledge work and digital labour. In order to carefully position this study, it becomes necessary to further discuss each of these concepts and their synonymity with as well as distinction from creative work.

Cultural work is perhaps the closest in meaning to creative work, if not a direct synonym for it (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). In his book, *The Politics of Cultural Work*, Banks (2007) defines cultural work as 'the act of labour within the industrialized process of cultural production' (p. 3). Cultural production then is the production of goods and services that are 'carriers of *meaning* in the form of images, symbols, signs and sounds' (p. 2) where they are deliberately produced with consideration for aesthetic appeal, style, taste and distinction (Banks, 2007). These cultural commodities then, do not differ from that which may be considered 'creative' in terms of being evaluated on their symbolic and aesthetic value. For Du Gay (1997) cultural production is 'dedicated to the pursuit of particular values – mainly 'art', 'beauty', 'authenticity' and 'truth'' (p. 1) which are in direct conflict with economic interests in profit. For Bourdieu, who wrote extensively on cultural production in a number of his essays, cultural production is that which is associated with the artistic and literary fields, but also with the production of symbolic goods as well as the systems and structures surrounding their consumption and uptake (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). Cultural production then, refers a more expansive system of beliefs and values that privilege the symbolic and aesthetic. This emphasis on the symbolic and aesthetic makes it largely interchangeable with my definition of creative work established earlier. As such, I consider cultural work - as the activity, and cultural production - as the system of production, as describing the same activities and systems as those surrounding creative work and therefore consider them synonymous with the term creative work in this thesis.

An existing critique against modern developments of the capitalistic system addresses issues relating to labour that is focused on language, communication and the symbolic as modes of production (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Such labour, termed 'immaterial labour' is also interested in the outcomes of this production, namely the immaterial goods – which are services, products, knowledge or communication (Hardt



and Negri, 2000). This notion of immateriality emphasises the aspects of ‘hearts and minds’ that are called into production processes (Gill and Pratt, 2008). As such definitions of intellectual, cognitive, affective and emotional labour are implicated in immaterial labour. For Berardi (2009) intellectual and cognitive labour is that which relies on the general intellect, the mental and rational capacities of the individual. Those performing jobs on a highly cognitive level find they invest their creative and innovative competencies into their work but also this highly cognitive work ensnares their affect, their feelings and experiences of love, joy but also fear, guilt and desire (Berardi, 2009). It is precisely for this reason that the concept of immaterial labour is explored from a much more political rather than purely sociological perspective (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Where creative work attempts to delineate groups of individuals through identifying the particular features of their work, immaterial labour attends to these features as culminating in the deliberate political critique of contemporary capitalism.

Despite the shared emphasis on the symbolic, not all creative work is immaterial labour, just as not all immaterial labour is creative work. For example, creative works frequently involve the material – including physical objects and the body; and may not necessarily involve the intellect – for example where there are repetitive tasks involved in some aspects of the work. For this reason, the immaterial qualities, such as thinking and intellectual capacities cannot be assumed to be equivalent to creative work. However, despite this inequivalence, creative work involves a great deal of intellectual labour – involved in working with new concepts and ideas, perhaps to a greater extent than other types of work (Townley, Beech, and McKinlay, 2009). As such, we understand that while not synonymous with creative work, talk of intellectual and cognitive labour also relates to the very work done by creative workers. To a similar degree, emotional labour, where human emotions and feelings are appropriated into work and form a part of the means of production (Hochschild, 1983), plays an important part in creative work. More specifically creative work has an expressive element (Townley et al., 2009) which is not necessarily linked to rational thinking but rather a part of the affective or experiential qualities of our existence. Affect and emotions are therefore a particularly pervasive part of creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, 2011; Luckman, 2012; Taylor and Littleton, 2013).

Knowledge work, defined as the management of knowledge via intellectual skills and formal education (Alvesson, 2004) also overlaps in many ways with creative work, specifically with its regard for using intellectual skills and capacities of individuals to

complete work. In addition, both knowledge work and creative work produce products that are often difficult to measure and depend largely on subjective assessments for their evaluation (Alvesson, 2001; Blackler, 1995). One important difference however, is the emphasis on formalised knowledge – including professional skills and work that may be standardised (Alvesson, 2001). As such, knowledge work and knowledge workers are much more likely than creative workers to be professionalised. Moreover, the production of knowledge work in these professionalised settings does not rely as strongly on the aesthetic or subjective tastes of its audience (consider medical professionals or legal ones who work guided by the jurisdictions appropriate to their respective professions than the whims of their clients). In this regard, knowledge work differs from creative work based on the latter's interest in novelty and aesthetics as sources of value over a reliance on established or formalised expertise. Therefore, it is possible to consider creative work a specialised form of knowledge work (Huws, 2010) that uses intellectual capacities to produce symbolic and aesthetic goods. Nevertheless, considering all knowledge work as creative work may not be equally sensible as not knowledge work is not all based on these same or similar values as creative work.

Lastly, digital labour refers to the inescapable presence of technology in the performance of contemporary work (Colbert et al., 2016). Technology prevails as a means and a medium for performing a large number of work tasks across a variety of industries, yet there is a growing number of workers whose primary medium for the production of work is digital technologies. Creative workers and creative work seems to be central to much analysis of digital work as it is assumed that these workers are at the heart of digital content production (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Huws, 2014; Ross, 2013). The production and management of digital media is consequently seen as part of the domain of creative work (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). From this assumption however it is easy to neglect areas of creative work that take non-digital forms. For example, work with physical materials including forms of craft and hand-craft may be neglected in the subsumption of all creative work as digital labour. Other forms such as embodied performances - such as dance (Slutskaya and De Cock, 2008), opera (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, and Greig, 2012), and other literary and musical mediums (Barrett, 1998; Juuti and Littleton, 2012; Morgan and Wood, 2014; Shaw, 2013; Thomson, 2013; Umney and Kretsos, 2014) may also be neglected. As such, exploring creative work outside of digital labour may prove just as fruitful as creative work which is dominated by cultures of technology. Understandably, however,

the latter may be of particular interest in the age of ‘digital capitalism’ where ‘digital media technologies have profoundly altered every aspect of our lives’ including creative work, where the ‘digitization of the cultural industries, for example, has changed every aspect of popular culture’ (Burston, Dyer-witheford, and Hearn, 2010, p. 214). Understanding creative work as a part of the changing digital life and work landscape may prove rewarding for the study of contemporary working lives, but it is important to distinguish here that the two concepts are agreeably overlapping but clearly not synonymous with each other.

### ***Contexts for the Study of Creative Work***

Defining creative work, then, as work that is involved in producing goods and services which have a novel, but also symbolic and aesthetic value allows for the narrowing in on the specific contexts where such work might occur. For Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) this type of work is carried out as part of the ‘cultural industries’, which they deliberately include in their definition of creative work. Interest in these ‘culture industries’ or perhaps more commonly ‘creative industries’ has burgeoned over the last two decades. This particular trend was bolstered by cultural policies in the late nineties by the then labour government in the UK (Garnham, 2005; Oakley, 2004). Some debate continues around distinction between ‘cultural’ and ‘creative’ industries, but for the most part since the UK’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) attempt at rebranding from the former to the latter, the label ‘creative industries’ has seemed to stick - if somewhat unenthusiastically (for a more detailed discussion on the difference see Garnham, 2005; O’Connor, 2009, 2010 and Ross, 2007). Creativity, in the new neoliberal order of the west has become central to understandings of the ‘new economy’ or the contemporary qualities of work (Banks, 2007; Brouillette, 2014; Garnham, 2005; McRobbie, 2002).

In many respects creative work, as it is defined here, is carried out across a number of different contexts and workplaces. For purposes of clarifying, at least quantitatively, the DCMS have attempted to separate the meanings of ‘creative economy’, ‘creative industries’ and ‘creative occupations’ (DCMS, 2015). According to the DCMS’ *Creative Industries: Focus on Employment* report, creative occupations were those working in creative capacities, irrespective of industry. Creative industries, on the other hand included those working in creative capacities but also those not working with the production of creative goods directly (i.e. finance and administration)

but who overall carried out their jobs within organisations who primarily produced creative goods. Lastly creative economy examined both groups together (DCMS, 2015). Studying individuals working in creative occupations, but outside the creative industries may prove interesting for understanding the micro-challenges of creative work. However, it would tell us only minimally about how such work is organised or the challenges facing creative workers and the production of creative work more broadly. So while acknowledging that creative work may occur beyond the creative industries, I shall, for the purposes of this thesis, focus on the work conducted within organisations whose primary objective is the production of creative goods. In the UK, this represents around 1,8 million workers – a number that has increased in the three years from 2011 to 2014 by 15.8% (DCMS, 2015), that is almost 100,000 new workers employed in the creative industries in the UK every year.

Internationally this growth is looking similar. In the UN report on the Creative Economy (2010) the value of exports of creative goods almost doubled globally between 2002 and 2008, with growth rates in the export of creative goods in developed economies sitting at 10% annually, and 13.5% respectively in developing economies for the same period. All sub-sectors of the creative industries, namely categorised by the UN as (1) heritage (arts and crafts and recreational services); (2) arts (visual arts and performing arts); (3) media (publishing and audio-visual goods and services); and (4) functional creations (design, new media, advertising, and architecture services) grew between 7.2% and 20.9% in the five year period (UN, 2010). Numbers of those employed in these diverse types of creative work, then, also grew (Raufast et al., 2015; UN, 2010). The employment of creative workers, however, does not necessarily match the number of aspirants looking to be employed in the creative industries, with Menger (1999, 2014) noting a continued superabundance of those aspiring to work in the creative industries compared to the number of jobs available. As such, much creative work is characterised by contract work carried out on fairly precarious terms (Caves, 2003). The discourse of precarity is thus a preeminent feature in the extant research on creative work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Morgan and Wood, 2014; Morgan, Wood, and Nelligan, 2013; De Peuter, 2014; Ross, 2008). Many resulting in depth studies of creative work and creative workers are thus conducted looking at experiences of aspirants or the self-employed creative workers (Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; McRobbie, 1998; Taylor, 2015; Taylor and Littleton,

2013) or those working as freelancers or on short-term contracts (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, 2011; Randle and Culkin, 2009; Rowlands and Handy, 2012; Ursell, 2000).

The study of the economics of 'culture' (or creativity) is a focus on the 'practical ways in which 'economically relevant activity' is performed and enacted' (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002, p. iv). For Du Gay and Pryke (2002) the examination of this 'economically relevant activity' is evident in the general economic sphere but also, more specifically, in the study of organisational relations. Consequently Smith and McKinlay (2009) note that 'how work is structured and what people do when they make creative products remains relatively under-researched' (p. 5). Studying formal work organisations, then, can reveal more about how such work is organised or how managerial practices 'make up' economic realities and everyday experiences of creative work (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002) beyond those already studied. Furthermore, organisations are constituted by discourses as social systems which govern appropriate ways of being but which are simultaneously contested and challenged in everyday interactions (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Grant et al., 2004). The closer examination of creative organisations can tell us about how individuals navigate such socio-political terrains in the context of creative work.

One now famous sociological study of creative work is Judith Blau's (1984) examination of architect firms and practices. Her study revealed how organisational structures can house power inequalities. It also uncovered some of the ideas and practices that dominate architectural work. Interestingly she also explored how these ideas affected architects' understandings of their careers and themselves as architects. In sum, Blau's study exemplified the great deal of complexity faced in the navigation of creative work. In a similar study that spanned several creative work organisations O'Donnell (2014) examined the organisation and structuring of video game development. Taking more of an industry and network approach he explored many different features of the video game design process. His study explored many dimensions of creative work in video game production - describing processes and tools of work but also acknowledging the experiences of working in such an industry. While his study exposed much about the previously unknown area of video game design, it was very focused account of these processes and did not directly address dimensions or characteristics of work organisations which may play a role in shaping these processes and experiences of creative work. Lastly, Alvesson's (1994) study of an advertising agency explored the role of organisational discourses in shaping individuals' identities

and impressions. More specifically it showed advertising persons struggles to maintain positive identities and impressions of themselves in a rather ambiguous and challenging as well as subjective context (Alvesson, 1994). This study offers perhaps the first clue that creative work in creative organisations is much more intricate and complicated by the nature of creative work as subjective and context specific.

In particular, Alvesson's study draws our attention to the importance of studying the discourses within creative work that may shape and influence organisational cultures but also, managerial practices, and experiences of creative work within the creative organisation. More specifically, discourses provide the 'material for determining the conceptual figure of this industrial and occupational culture, thus providing an understanding of the deeper aspects of the industry and its organizations' (Alvesson, 1994, p. 547).

### ***Discourses of Creative Work***

Of the studies that have been conducted looking closely at the conditions and experiences of creative workers there are a number of discourses prevail across these accounts. These discourses-as-structures are implicated in the formation of social relations as they are deployed as resources in the everyday talk and texts of individuals (Broadfoot et al., 2004). These guide not only those actions frameable by language but also behaviours and non-discursive communicative practices which ultimately reveal socially constructed meanings but also personal experiences (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). Tuori and Vilén (2011) examined creativity as a discourse in creative organisations and the effects of this discourse on worker subjectivities. What they discovered was that the broader discourses about creativity were echoed within the organisations they studied and created a hype around being creative which meant 'that organizational members who are considered to be more creative can be valued over others' (p. 91) which became a source of power for those valued as creative. This goes to show how societal level meanings of concepts such as creativity can play a role in determining work experiences and conditions but also for organising work and subjectivities of creative workers (Tuori and Vilén, 2011). Therefore, in order to understand challenges faced by individuals in creative organisations it is necessary to explore some of the dominating discourses of creative work that prevail across different creative work contexts and have been identified by the existing literature.

### **The overly positive and romanticised view of creativity**

Creativity is consistently viewed in a desirable and romanticised manner (Blomberg, 2014; Negus and Pickering, 2004; Prichard, 2002; Ross, 2008). This romanticised view of creativity retains its status from earlier views of creativity as associated with artists and artistic activity which carried ‘associations of something magical or metaphysical (...) in some guises, a sort of messenger from God or, in others, an intensely perceptive spirit able to elevate our seeing to a superior reality’ (Negus and Pickering, 2000, p. 263). Ross (2008) has gone as far as calling creativity ‘the oil of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (p. 32) – something that affects the views of commerce but also individuals’ desires. These utopian ideals of a creative career lure many towards the promises of creativity and creative work (Banks and O’Connor, 2009; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). These discourses on creativity are reproduced within creative organisations and have effects on organisational culture and ideologies (Tuori and Vilén, 2011). This idealised view of creativity, then, gives creative work a desirable edge that attracts workers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 1998, 2002; Taylor and Littleton, 2013) but also simultaneously shapes and influences their experiences of creative work (Tuori and Vilén, 2011). This discourse has implications for power relations in organisations which regulate who or what is considered creative as well as the subject positions informing and taken up by individuals in their discursive practices (Tuori and Vilén, 2011). The overly positive view of creativity works to attract and shape creative workers through the ‘fetishisation of creative selves’ but it can also work to deflect our attention from more challenging and potentially harmful outcomes of this discourse which are seldom explored in more depth in creative organisations (Prichard, 2002).

### **Importance of an audience**

As pointed out earlier, the distinction between who or what is considered creative is socially determined. Audiences for creative goods have sufficient power in shaping works and other outcomes of creative work (Ertug, Yogev, Lee, and Hedstrom, 2016; Menger, 2013) - making audiences instrumental to creative work (Bourdieu, 1993). Caves (2000) points out the need for creative workers to share and present their work to audiences who evaluate it. These evaluation processes are brought together in networks that adjoin the worlds of art and commerce (Caves, 2000). This conceptualisation for the valuation of creative work is similar to Howard Becker’s (1982) seminal sociological work describing the contexts of creative work as ‘art worlds’. In his book of the same name, *Art Worlds*, Becker formulates these specific worlds as consisting of ‘all the

people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art' (p. 34). These worlds, he argues, are not only comprised of creators. Instead he emphasises the inter-subjective and interrelated nature of both the production and consumption of creative works. Bourdieu's (1986, 1993) work on cultural production makes similar claims – that creative work is not simply a product of a creator, but needs to be understood in relation to the field of cultural production. Bourdieu (1993) also distinguishes between different audiences and their roles in constructing the markets for symbolic goods. The field of restricted production is limited to other cultural producers who have the cultural capital to value certain creative goods, while the field of large-scale cultural production is cultural goods intended for the 'public-at-large' (Bourdieu, 1993). This emphasis on an audience, both in close proximity to work but also more broadly, stresses the contested and intersubjective nature of creative work, that can be largely dependent on the subjectivity of significant others in combination with structuration processes to determine value as well as meanings of creative work (Bourdieu, 1993).

### **Autonomy and the self-made individual**

Discourses and desires for autonomy in work are part of the new normal of contemporary experiences of life and work (Berardi, 2009; Du Gay, 1996; Hodson, 2001; Rose, 1998). According to Miller and Rose (1990) work is no longer seen as a constraint on one's freedom to 'fulfil his or her potential through strivings for autonomy, creativity and responsibility' rather work becomes 'an essential element in the path of self-realization' (p. 27). Workplace autonomy, or ability to determine the conditions of one's work are fairly frequently cited as a recognisable feature of creative work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Hodson, 2001; Lingo and Tepper, 2013; O'Connor, 2009; Schumacher, 2006; Thompson et al., 2016). In Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) study of three media industries, autonomy of creative workers was granted on the basis that they would use their freedom to 'produce results imbued with creativity' (p. 87). This meant a softening of formal controls, but also responsibility for how work is to be carried out being shifted primarily to the individual. Such individuation of the worker emphasises the role of the self in creative work. Individuals are encouraged by the discourses around autonomy to become self-enterprising (Rose, 1998; Taylor, 2015; Ursell, 2000). While this freedom and flexibility can have a positive impact on the personal meaning derived from work (Blauner, 1964) and potential for



self-actualisation (McRobbie, 1998, 2002; Ursell, 2000), it also means that creative workers become increasingly self-reliant and face increased rates of competition and insecurity in their bids to ‘make themselves’ (McRobbie, 2002). As such, there is a call to critically examine the discourses of autonomy and flexibility in creative work as they may lead to a variety of experiences – including inequalities and challenges for workers rather than simple fulfilment of desirable ideals (Gill, 2002).

### **Creative work’s potential for self-realisation**

The idea that selves are reflexively ‘fashioned’ in an ongoing project-of-the-self in our ‘search for meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, [and] a maximised ‘quality of life’ (Rose, 1989, p. 103) is part of the historic shift towards concerns for self and identity and desires to work on one’s self in late modernity (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1989, 1998). Due to its emphasis on autonomy and self-making, creative work is a likely site and setting where workers incorporate their sense of self in their work and efforts towards self-actualisations (Menger, 2013; Prichard, 2002; Taylor, 2010). The pursuit of self-actualising activity can be a motivating factor in creative work and explain why individuals pursue creative work for reasons other than monetary reward (Ursell, 2000). There is compelling desire for creative workers to construct a self through their work that is highly prized and regarded by others as unique (Prichard, 2002; Ursell, 2000). Broader discourses of creativity, including those highly romanticised ones, affirm the societal value of creative work and opportunities to develop these desired selves – making it an alluring vocation (McRobbie, 1998, 2002; Taylor, 2013). Specific identities are then valorised by this discourse – that of the *auteur*, the creative artist, is positioned as one who is successful in their ambitions to self-actualise (McRobbie, 1998). This identity and image constructed from the discourse around the potential for self-realisation through creative work can become a part of defining ‘good’ creative work and developing creative workers emotional well-being (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Despite the existing theorisations of it, the self-actualisation rhetoric requires further empirical examination for its potential to aid workers in constructing rewarding meanings from their work but also for disciplining workers in their quest to become the ‘appropriate creative workers’.

## **Creative feelings**

Drawing selves into creative work implies an exploration into how human ‘energies, bodies, subjectivities, minds and meaning-making’ (Wetherell, 2015, p. 141) become a part of cultural production. More specifically, there is a growing discourse around the role of affect and emotions in creative work. Psychological studies on creativity have long argued the relation between affective states and creative processes (Shaw and Runco, 1994). Beyond a psychological perspective, there is some limited work being done exploring the construction of emotions in the context of creative work (Ahuja, Heizmann, and Clegg, Forthcoming; Ash, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). In their 2008 paper and 2010 book exploring creative work in the media industries, Hesmondhalgh and Baker show how creative workers working on a TV talent show were called upon to carry out emotional labour. Workers were required to not only manage their own emotions in the process of making the TV show by either following or breaking the ‘emotional rules of production’ (2008, p. 111), but also those of others. There were expectations on creative workers to, for example, manage TV show contestants’ emotions as part of the successful production of the show (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Success with this kind of affective labour was crucial to the development of a good reputation and promise of future contracts (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008, 2011). Similarly, Ash (2010) found that video game designers were called upon to work with affect by designing positive affective experiences for gamers – thereby arguing that affect is a central concern for game designers. Strong feelings of affective attachment towards one’s work was also observed in Thompson et al.’s (2016) study of video game development workers. The researchers concluded that such feelings of passion were compensation for some for long hours and insecurity experienced across the industry (Thompson et al., 2016). Feelings of passion for one’s work were also expressed by the young fashion designers in Angela McRobbie’s (1998) study of the British fashion industry, which she described as a ‘labour of love’. According to McRobbie (1998), this labour offered the promise of ultimately leading to a self-love. Expression of love and passion by creative workers echoes the views and discourse embroiling affect in creative work as part of the contemporary economic landscape (Allen, 2002; Karppi, Kähkönen, Mannevu, and Pajala, 2016; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998).

## **Work hard, play hard**

The last discourse of creative work described here touches on two paradoxical qualities which are found in close parallel in creative work settings – a culture focused on ‘fun’, and long working hours and job insecurity (Gill, 2002). These contemporary cultures of ‘cool’ based on an ideal of ‘play at work’ are representative of the growing counterculture-as-management borne in hip technology areas such as Silicon Valley in the US (Brooks and Bowker, 2002). Andrew Ross’ (2003) examination of the new media company Razorfish in his book *No Collar* epitomises these new ideals of the ‘humane workplace’ where hierarchies were flattened, informality ruled and you were free and encouraged to ‘be yourself’. This corporatisation of a bohemian lifestyle where the ‘hedonism of company culture was carefully crafted’ (Ross, 2003, p. 89) coincides with the extension of work into life and life into work (Fleming, 2014; Land and Taylor, 2010) in creative work settings. In their study of video game makers De Peuter and Dyer-Witthford saw how the discourse of fun manifested into ‘flexible hours, lax dress code, free food, fitness facilities, parties, and funky interior design’ which ‘also encompasses a host of intangible qualities, from “rebelliousness” to twisted humour to self-expression’ (no page). This blurring of boundaries between life and work and the discourse of ‘fun at work’ normalises the long work hours and insecurity experienced in creative workplaces (Gill, 2002; Thompson et al., 2016). Recent examination of labour relations lawsuits in a prominent games development company showed how creative workers were expected to work longer than 40 hours per week and across weekends and national holidays and that work represented less the ideals of creative expression and more the assembly lines of Fordism (De Peuter and Dyer-Witthford, 2005; Schumacher, 2006). Observations made about such paradoxical discourses in creative work call for the more careful examination of the experiences of creative workers and the conditions of creative work.

The discourses introduced above do not represent a totality of discourses available to creative workers, nor do they set clear boundaries for discursive structures that govern creative work. Instead I have attempted to cover some of the more dominant and more clearly identifiable discourses within the existing literature on creative work. Through examining some of these discourses we can understand some of the attempts to ‘normalize features of the world in particular ways e.g. as attributes of ‘creativity’ or ‘creative people’ (Prichard, 2002, p. 273) but also the relations of power that enable

certain experiences and exclude others. In a bid to understand creative work empirically we must look to understand not only the macro-discursive conditions of creative work that set norms for conditions and experiences of work, but also the micro-everyday subjective experiences and meanings of creative workers. Perhaps the in-depth study of individuals' engagement with these discourses within a creative organisation may give us a richer picture of life and work in a creative organisation but also the struggles and challenges faced by creative workers in contemporary creative work settings. This will then go further to answer the question what happens in the creative organisation and how do workers navigate this?

### ***Summary***

This chapter has set out to explore the many understandings of 'creative work'. In doing so I have defined creative work as paid work activity that produces symbolic and aesthetic goods and services. In narrowing down the concept we are able to explore the kind of work settings where this kind of work may take place. Of particular interest are creative work organisations that are a part of the creative industries. Such organisations help structure the work and practices of creative workers but are also simultaneously constituted through them. Understanding the existent and dominant discourses-as-structures which may frame such activity, then, proves useful for interpreting the narrative and experiences constructed by individuals in the creative organisation. Paying closer attention to these experiences, but also giving space for a multitude of various voices and narratives of creative workers in the creative organisation can inform us of the intricacies of organisational life demonstrate how dominant meanings and experiences 'emerge from the power-laden context in which they are negotiated' (Hall, 2001, p. 72).



### 3. Creative Work Selves

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In understanding creative work, more can be done to examine the everyday experience of creative workers to tell their stories about what is happening within the creative organisations they work in. The role of this research project is to get close to these experiences and re-tell them in a way that reduces the distance between experiencing subject and the lived experience (Denzin, 1992; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). Paying attention to experiences of creative workers goes further to tell us about the power and politics that plays out in organisations. Moreover, paying attention to selves as experiential, embroiled with various emotions in relation to both work and life of workers can ‘expose the subtle dilemmas, ambivalences, and contradictions of work life’ (Fineman, 2006, p. 283). These private issues of everyday life relate to the broader more public issues of work in creative work organisations and what it means to be a creative worker or *do* creative work. In addressing these issues this chapter will first explore the framings of subjective experience and experiencing selves as well as emotions. It will then move to focus on existing research on selves-at-work, with work being often cited as a dominant site where selves are actively fashioned (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1989, 1998). The chapter then goes on to explore some of the images of creative selves constructed across the academic and broader societal milieu. These images are inspired by discourses and serve as sources for shaping identities, selves, and the behaviours of creative workers. While not fixed it is possible to see how these images and other discourses, introduced in the previous chapter, influence creative workers’ experiences. Lastly this chapter explores some of the studies that have already examined some of these experiences in more depth. While a great deal of this literature focuses on creative aspirants and those precariously employed in various creative industries, a few limited studies have explored creative worker experiences from an organisational perspective. In this regard, there is a necessity to address these shortcomings in our understanding of the organisational experiences and navigating work of creative workers through further study.

#### ***Experiencing Selves at Work***

The study of creative work from a social constructionist perspective implies that structures and reality are not ‘out there’ in the world but rather constructed in the everyday intersubjective interactions of individuals (Burr, 2015). Reality is thus an

ongoing accomplishment where individuals ‘together construct and reconstruct meaning as they act and interact’ (Charmaz, 1996, p. xiii). Discourses-as-structures, under this premise, are seen as ‘existing only to the extent that they are endlessly reproduced in the language and knowledge resources deployed by individuals engaged in organizing processes’ (Broadfoot, Deetz, and Anderson, 2004, p. 194). This calls for an examination of the social world and its structures not as rigid and fixed but as fluid and changing dependent on the personal meanings individuals develop (Blumer, 1969). These changes, therefore, occur through the interpretive processes of everyday life (Blumer, 1969; Holstein and Gubrium, 2005). Examining the subjective experiences of individuals can develop understandings of the ways in which social order is constituted (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005) but also how individuals live and cope with the various realities and meanings that this order implies. Experiences here are defined as the study of human lived experiences as they are produced in texts - but not removed from the subjects of the experiences or their contexts (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992) Listening to the voices and exploring the narratives of lived experiences in the creative organisation can bring light to challenges and struggles faced by workers in the organisation by giving voice to the silenced, the unsaid, and the unquestioned.

Addressing collections of experiences of everyday life in their narrativised forms allows for a closer examination of causes, effects, and nuances - all while assembling them in ways that reveal broader understandings (Johnston, 2005) and connect personal troubles to public issues (Denzin, 1992; Mills, 1959). These personal troubles derive from our interactions with the social world – through which we develop meanings and understandings for navigating it. One such meaning that has consistently caused concern for scholars from social psychologist to sociologists alike throughout history is how we come to understand ourselves (cf. Cohen, 1994; Gecas, 1982; Gergen, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Mansfield, 2000). In the context of late modernity, selves have become problematic not only as a question of philosophy but one of everyday subjective experience (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Mansfield, 2000). We are regularly called upon to reflexively construct and understand our selves in relation to the social and engage this understanding in far more challenging and complex ways (Bauman, 2001; Gergen, 2000; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Rose, 1989, 1998). The exploration of the subjective experiences of selves tells us about the ‘networks of power that traverse modern societies’ of which self and subjectivity have become a vital element (Rose, 1989, p. 213). Therefore, this chapter will work to address the existing understandings

and construction of selves experienced and expressed as part of work and creative work respectively.

### **Experiencing selves**

Departing from essentialist views of selves that see our self-concept as an embodied and inherent part of our psyche, I follow a theory of the self as a social construction (Gergen, 2011a). Selves are constructed in reflexive moments but always in the shadow of the social meanings and structures that give them life (Gergen, 2011a; Giddens, 1991). Discourses provide resources for fashioning ourselves and identities in ways that favour some constructions and limit others (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In such ways, selves are a part of the social, developed and built through the use of available discursive resources in the construction of our meanings, understandings, and lived experiences (Burkitt, 1991; Denzin, 1985; Gergen, 2011). Attempts to study selves as social constructions move away from ideas of selves as belonging to an inner or essential being (Gergen, 2011a). Rather than reflecting an 'inner mind' or psyche, expressions of selves reflect our reflexive self-understandings and their relation to the social world (Gergen, 2011a). As such, ideas around 'true' and 'authentic' selves may be called into question as they are, in this case, representative of potential social challenges experienced by individuals rather than an ontologically 'real' and stable core self (Gergen, 2011b; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Putting into question the ontological status of selves emphasises the experiential element of selves that sees them as fluid and temporal constructions rather than fixed and continuous understandings of an essential core of an individual (Gergen, 2000, 2011b; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

In experiencing and reflecting on ourselves we develop our identities. Identities are directly related to selves but I do not consider them equivalent to each other. Identities, as they are used in this thesis, are the meanings that individuals 'attach reflexively to their selves' (Brown, 2015, p. 21; Gecas, 1982) as they seek to navigate the social world. These specific kinds of meanings, that we label identities, are understood here as socially constructed and thus become shared (Watson, 2008a; Watson and Watson, 2012). Identities are the outcomes of identification processes through which we identify with targets or objects in attempts to produce a unity between ourselves and them (Brown, 2017). While identities help us make sense of and derive meaning for our sense of self, the self refers to the experiential dimension of the self-consciousness or a 'personal awareness of a continuity of being' (Brown, 2015, p. 23;



Giddens, 1991). Selves are deeply embedded in the consciousness of our lived experiences (Denzin, 1983, 1985, 1992). As such, feelings and emotions are means through which we make sense of these experiences and of ourselves (Denzin, 1983, 1985). In studying selves as the experiential constructions of self-consciousness, we acknowledge the labels and meanings (identities) constructed but also the emotional experiences as entwined with experiencing selves (Denzin, 1983, 1985). In doing so I do not reduce any one category to the other but rather aim to explore their interrelations and complexities in a richer way that is afforded by studying all three (identities, selves, emotions). In doing so I also acknowledge that it may not also be possible to easily separate each from the others – but I attempt to do so on an analytical level by exploring the different constructions and their interpretive meanings.

Language helps us to communicate and share the constructions of identities, selves, and emotions in our interactions with others (Denzin, 1983). Ways of making sense of the experiences of selves are then socially constructed and will vary depending on different constellations of circumstances facing individuals (Collinson, 2003; Watson, 2008a). Discourses, provided by our interactions with the social, offer resources for making sense and for constructing our self-experience, but also the emotions we express (Brown, 2015; Coupland, Brown, Daniels, and Humphreys, 2008; Kuhn, 2006; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). In this way, emotions and emotionality are not seen as bodily experiences but rather, by being constructed reflexively in direct relation to the self, they are social and interactional accomplishments (Denzin, 1983; Wetherell, 2012). The range and multitude of possible selves and emotions experienced depend on the discourses available in the social realm of any individual (Harré, 1986; Wetherell, 2012, 2015). In getting closer to the meanings of particular selves shared, it is therefore necessary to contextualise the self-reflections in order to make sense of them. Language is useful for this as it shares meanings as well as constitutes what is possible and not possible (Bedford, 1986; Harré, 1986; Wetherell, 2012). In understanding selves through language we are able to examine individuals' self-constructions but also their personal troubles resulting from the social conditions they face.

### **Emotional selves**

Emotions and emotionality are particularly rewarding for studying personal struggles as their construction gives us simultaneous access to the personal and social worlds of individuals and selves. Echoing calls to bring emotions in a more central light in

sociological research (Barbalet, 2002; Berezin, 2002; Franks, 1985; Thoits, 1989; Wharton, 2009) requires the consideration of emotional displays, performances and emotion talk in everyday life (Wetherell, 2012) but also how these practices may relate to the construction of selves.

Emotions become salient in reflecting on ourselves but also in social interactions – for example in experiencing others' evaluations and judgements (Denzin, 1983). For Denzin (1983, 1985) this represents a 'circuit of the self' where selves are constructed dependent on our interactions that connects a double structure of the self: 'a feeling of self that emotion reveals to the self, and the movement into a line of action that enacts emotionality and feeling' (1985, p. 225). This emotionality 'draws the subject into social, moral, and emotional relations with others' (Denzin, 1985, p. 225). Denzin (1983) goes further in his development of the circuit of the self to distinguish between surface emotions, as the taken for granted feelings, and deep emotions, that reflect core inner feelings of the self. Stepping away from the notion of levels of feelings (which according to a constructionist perspective are not ontologically different), his conception of the self and emotions develops a very important point – that emotions and selves as experiential are interrelated but also formed through their expression in language – that is the way their thoughts, feelings and memories are shared and linked to the social (Denzin, 1983). This further stresses the importance of addressing emotional experiences for addressing our understandings of selves.

In the study of affect, as 'embodied meaning-making' related to human emotion, Wetherell (2012) argues for more effort and interest in how 'affective textures and activities of everyday life are shaped' (p. 4). She points to the discrepancies in the existing literature on affect – mainly the attempts to separate the body and its reactions from consciousness and reflection. Rather she argues for the role of discourse and the social in constructing and thereby constituting our emotions so that it becomes impossible to remove bodily reactions and discursive emotional accounts from their social context (Wetherell, 2012). Affective practices then work within social relations by 'regulating, mediating, conserving, and disrupting the status quo' (p. 114) usually coming together in a complex interrelated mix of emotions available from a social canon but also based on self-regulating activities of individuals – through aspirations, setting of ideals, and self-control (Wetherell, 2012). These practices raise significant questions about the role of power in the enactment of emotions and selves. Ultimately, Wetherell argues that the study of emotions and affective practices will 'enrich sociological work

on the ways in which social formations are configured, come to power and dissolve' (p. 116).

Burkitt (2002) also agrees that emotions are embedded in our social structures and power relations. Structures and power regulates the feelings and emotions we display and also make possible their articulation (Burkitt, 2002). In this way emotions work in the political sphere by not only telling us what it is we should and can feel, but also how and when to feel it (Ahmed, 2004). This implies that experiencing emotions relating to the self, are caught up with the socio-political conditions and discourses that inspire their constructions. Selves and emotions therefore overlap - as emotions often speak to how we experience ourselves (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Denzin, 1983; Fineman, 2006; Franks, 1985). Expressing and performing of various emotions in complex ways can indicate well-being but also personal struggles and challenges faced by particular selves (Collinson, 2003). As we look across emotional and self-accounts of individuals, the intricate ways emotions are incorporated in experiences can reveal not only dangerous self-troubles but also the social conditions that encourage their development (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Collinson, 2003; Kenny, 2010, 2012; Vince, 2002). This binary between the personal experience and the broader social context is navigated and shaped, but also shapes, personal experiences of selves and emotions (Clegg and Baumeler, 2014). Organisations as work settings become distinct sites where such activity occurs, as attempts to present and regulate selves and emotions become a growing part of workers' everyday lives in work organisations (Clegg and Baumeler, 2014). Investigations exploring selves and emotions, I contend, are particularly relevant given growing enlistment of affectual relations for carrying out contemporary work (Andersen and Born, 2008; Fineman, 2000; Heelas, 2002; Karppi et al., 2016; Thrift, 2005).

### **Working selves**

Management scholars have long been paying attention to subjectivities of the worker as a means for managing and producing work outcomes (Hanlon, 2017; Heelas, 2002). This humanistic movement saw happy and satisfied selves as beneficial rather than detrimental to delivering on organisational and work interests (Heelas, 2002). Nikolas Rose (1989) in his book *Governing the Soul*, argues that this is a phenomenon of late modernity where the self-actualisation of the worker is now firmly reconciled with the competitive advancement of the company. In what he calls the 'new psycho-technology

of work' he addresses the fact that 'work is no longer necessarily a constraint upon the freedom of the individual to fulfil his or her potential' instead it has become 'an essential element in the path to self-fulfillment' and that the 'antithesis between managing adaptation to work and struggling for rewards from work is transcended' (p. 118). Rather than a barrier to actualising a desired self, work has become the means through which these desires can be achieved (Driver, 2017; Kenny, 2012; Kenny, Muhr, & Olaison, 2011). From Giddens' (1991) perspective the self is an ongoing project where one 'works' on a sense of self across different articulations. In such ways, selves and identities are reflexively fashioned in the processes of work so to develop favourable self-understandings (Brown and Coupland, 2015; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009).

Individuals use various resources to make sense of themselves at work. Identification of selves with, for example, organisational culture (Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Reilly and Chatman, 1996); career (Grey, 1994; Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010); and profession (Ibarra, 1999; Korica and Molloy, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Slay and Smith, 2010; Zikic and Richardson, 2016) are just some of the qualities of work with which selves are identified and constructed. Yet these qualities often refer to the contextual dynamics encountered by individuals that shape their working lives. Organisational culture, for example acts as a mechanism to discipline and regulate selves and identities in the workplace (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Reilly and Chatman, 1996) developing the organisationally appropriate subject, or the 'organization man' of Whyte's (1956) book by the same name. Career is a target for narrativising selves in relation to future objectives and professional goals (Costas and Grey, 2014; Grey, 1994; Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015). Professions allow for the prioritisation of and identification with professional standards and practices that legitimise and give meaning to selves (Doolin, 2002; Greenwood, 1957). Professional work identities often destabilise the need for strong identification with one's organisation and rather establish bonds and identifications with communities or professional bodies beyond any specific organisation (Alvesson, 2000). While these are often more than simple targets and mechanisms for identification they offer the resources for ways to anchor selves and identities in organisationally inspired discourses and beyond (Doolin, 2002; Kuhn, 2006, 2009).

Organisation culture, careers, and professions seemingly offer ways to identify oneself with that which may lay in the symbolic, ideological and imaginary, that is

reflecting a desired state rather than the everyday realities (Czarniawska, 1988; Roberts, 2005). This may make these and other shared concepts seem somewhat inconsistent with everyday realities – for example in the case where challenging and rewarding promises of work are instead experienced as boring, repetitive and bureaucratic (Costas and Kärreman, 2016) so that the fantasies supported by the discourses are enacted and experienced quite differently in practice (Bloom, 2016; Ekman, 2013; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This makes paying attention to everyday constructions and experiences of selfhood even more important in relation to these shifting meanings and fields of power (Kondo, 1990). Individuals act to position themselves and struggle over identities which align with their desires and beliefs in ways that engages them with the broader ideologies and discourses as they attempt to navigate their own personal positions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Performing and articulating selves in line with one position and not another allows selves to appear, at least momentarily, stable and fixed. Studying these moments may be particularly rewarding for understanding how power organises selves at work. Yet looking across a series of moments or talk, even with the same individual, it becomes clear that selves, just as identities, are not fixed but rather fluid, fragmented and full of contradictions (Kondo, 1990). In teasing out these fragments and contradictions we are able to get a richer understanding of the workings of different ideologies and discourses as well as subject positions that these inspire within the context of an organisation (Mumby, 1988).

Selves are affected by fateful moments which may result in ontological insecurity, anxiety and personal meaninglessness (Giddens, 1991). Yet such threats, rather than resulting in the unravelling of the sense of self, can be appropriated in the construction of a self in order to retain desired and coherent selves in relation to work (Brown and Coupland, 2015). Therefore, attempts to fix selves in certain positions can be a way in which individuals work to resolve feelings of dissonance or uncertainty (Collinson, 2003; Kondo, 1990) or simply project images that appeal to others and impact interpersonal relations and evaluations of selves. These processes motivate the talk and behaviour of individuals at work (Kahn, 1990; Shamir, 1991). Individuals identify or disidentify with ideas and discourses that align with their self-views, just as they engage and disengage with their identities, work, organisational cultures, careers, professions and a whole host of other aspects of their working lives. The degree of engagement with these aspects can vary from individual to individual or even moment

to moment, yet the power of certain aspects over others produces a consistency across experiences and accounts that can be observed in ethnographic studies of organisations.

In Kunda's (1992) now well-known study of 'Tech', a high tech engineering company, he describes management's attempts to control selves and produce organisationally appropriate selves through a crafted corporate culture. In the face of these attempts to govern selves, Kunda observed how despite moments where selves appeared to collapse into organisation, many of the organisational members worked to maintain the boundaries between self and organisation. These attempts were observable in the emphasis by workers that they were 'wise' to management's bid to govern them - thereby exercising a form of cognitive distancing from the discourses and organisational culture. This managing and positioning of selves with certain discourses and not to others was also evident in Casey's (1995) similar ethnographic study of Hephaestus. In her study she found that individuals simultaneously adopted the 'Hephaestus self' while at times defending against some of its ideals. Extreme defensive attempts at resistance to the corporate culture and compliance or even dependence on the ideologies of the Hephaestus self were marginalised in favour of capitulated selves – selves that produced a 'sufficient sense of self-boundary' (p. 175) while allowing individuals to simultaneously and strategically engage with organisational discourses.

This necessity for self-management in the face of organisational demands was also evident in Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants. In her study Hochschild describes how flight attendants were called upon to manage their emotional responses in their interactions with customers. This demand for emotion work allows an employer to 'exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees' (p. 147) by dictating the kind of emotions and selves that are appropriate to display. However these emotional 'performances of self' in some cases collapsed the boundaries between self and job where the worker saw themselves as a part of the job (Hochschild, 1983). This collapsing led to reported feelings of 'emotional deadness' which became a means to cope with stress that formed based on the conditions of work. Others exercised a healthy distancing by articulating a clear distinction between self and role, maintaining an emotional performance that felt 'false'. Those carrying out this acting were not always able to maintain it and at times struggled under certain conditions – causing them to become estranged from acting and refuse to carry it out and thereby performed their jobs 'poorly' (Hochschild, 1983). In all cases the workers attempted to adjust themselves to cope with the demands and conditions of their work and the question became for them

how to do this well. In all three ethnographic studies of selves at work individuals attempted to navigate and manoeuvre themselves between several available positions in order to cope with the demands from their work and organisations. At times this was possible and at other times individuals appeared to struggle, acting more or less strategically in constructing themselves under different circumstances.

It is not surprising then that different strategies deployed in self-construction develop various and sometimes unpredictable outcomes. Distancing or dis-identification of the self from aspects at work through cynicism or humour may allow one to cope with ideas that are incongruent with a personal understanding of the self but do very little to actually resist the structures that bind the self to aspects of work (Contu, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Whittle, 2005). Further outcomes such as ambivalence are clear in these settings where individuals are successful to various degrees in managing the boundaries between selves and work (Casey, 1995; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Whittle, 2005) yet for others still exit from the organisation may appear as the only alternative to managing this relation (Casey, 1995; Costas and Fleming, 2009). The research so far exploring selves at work illustrates the need to understand selves in relation to the social contexts in which they are constructed - for example organisational settings and ideals that shape their formation (Skinner, 2012). Exploring the activity and outcome of self-formation of creative workers can help us understand how contemporary creative workers live and cope with the demands and conditions of their work, framed against the setting of the creative work organisation.

### ***Images of the Creative Self***

To understand the demands that may form on creative work selves and how these may be experienced within organisations it may be helpful to explore briefly some of the images of the creative worker that crystallise some understandings of how these individuals are viewed or may view themselves. In the last chapter we explored the discourses surrounding creative work more broadly. Here I will explore how these and other discourses might relate to the creative individual. What images, identities or subject positions might be inspired by these discourses around creative work that might be used to frame and shape how contemporary creative workers experience themselves. This work therefore looks at what the literature has to say on the personal level of the individual. What social and societal framings of the creative individual exist, and how might these influence and shape individuals' experiences of themselves? The question

of emotions remains germane here. What emotions are involved in the construction of the creative individual and what, if anything do these say about creative work and its contexts? These are some of the questions I attempt to address by developing the images of the creative self that circulate in the literature but are also similarly echoed in societal understandings and constructions of the creative worker.

### **The creative genius**

The emphasis on autonomy and individuals in creative work as well as specialisation of labour increases a sense of individualisation or emphasis on the self-forming subject (Bauman, 2001; Rose, 1998). Discourses surrounding the image of a single great creator are ripe in the literature on creative work. For example McRobbie's (1998) study of fashion design aspirants exposed how many looked to those proclaimed as 'genius' by the industry as exemplars of the ideal creative person, often those aspirants she interviewed used well-known artists work as a 'frame of reference' or aspiration for their own work. Caves (2000) describes these genius figures as the 'superstars' who are frequently idolised by emerging creatives. The notion of the single creative individual is further emphasised by the mystique surrounding creativity introduced in the previous chapter. As the source of creativity is unclear, assumptions are made about the way ideas are generated – in particular that they can be traced to the cognitive activities of a single individual (Weisberg, 1993). In contrast, there is much talk around the social nature of idea generation – that creative ideas are constructed in interaction or conversation with others and their works (Weisberg, 1993, 2010). This image of the lone creator also tends to disregard creative work that is done in collaboration or out of the view that many not only one creative worker contributed to a piece of creative work (Drazin, Glynn, and Kazanjian, 1999; John-Steiner, 2000; Miell and Littleton, 2004; Taylor, 2013). Despite advances in understanding these creative processes, the myth of the creative genius that emphasises a unique and special individual with talents and gifts that are inimitable by others persists (Taylor and Littleton, 2013).

Often this elitist way of thinking about creativity (Pathakl, 1992), that there are a special group of individuals that possess distinct talents or gifts, maintains itself due to its instrumental nature. In the narratives of aspirant creative workers collected by Taylor and Littleton (2013) this image was reflected in the expressions of difference and distinction which creative work offered these individuals. Creative work was a way to distinguish one's self which offered an allure to being 'creative' that attracts many



aspirants to creative work (Huws, 2006; Littleton, Taylor, and Eteläpelto, 2012; Morgan et al., 2013; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). In order to realise the image of the creative genius, the audience becomes significant in realising the desired identity of the individual through how the work is 'matched to and uniquely shaped by who the maker is' (Taylor and Littleton, 2013, p. 111). This identity affirmation occurs through the imprinting of a 'signature' to their work which equates aspects of the work with a certain individual, making it recognisable to themselves and others (Elsbach, 2009). However, success in attaining affirmation of the creative genius identity is not consistent and failures to live up to the image occur. Yet attempts to perform this identity can persist despite failures (Pektus, 1996) making the image, one of distinction and uniqueness, a possibly powerful and persistent influence on understandings of the creative self and creative work.

### **The suffering artist**

Another image that persists across the literature on the creative self is one of a worker that makes sacrifices for his or her work (Caves, 2000). Images of the suffering artist, one who forgoes all kinds of pleasures and wealth construct the idea that sacrifices are part and parcel of creative work. This goes with the belief that the work itself has a moral value that can be attained outside of the realm of monetary or other social conventions used to value work (Becker, 1982; Taylor and Littleton, 2008, 2013). This image propels the view of art-for-art's sake which sits beyond the realm of commercial interests and encourages creative workers to resist the ideology of production but also in turn they often forgo certain securities in their pursuit of becoming a successful artist (Caves, 2000). It has often been shown that individuals pursue creative work for reasons other than monetary reward (Ursell, 2000). These reasons include the compelling desire to self-actualise and reach an often imagined potential self that is highly prized and regarded by others as unique (Prichard, 2002; Ursell, 2000). Such a desirable self is constructed in the placement of value in creative work amongst the broader economic system (Taylor, 2013).

In his essay on the 'Production of Belief' Bourdieu (1986) addresses the ideology of the 'creator' as being one who is at conflict with economic interests which necessitates a disavowal of themselves from commercial and financial interests, at least in an explicit sense. It serves the creative to conceal 'from themselves and others the interests at stake in their practice' and by doing so they 'obtain the means of deriving

profits from disinterestedness' (p. 132). The 'great' creator benefits from their 'economic prudence' by setting themselves apart from those who more openly seek commercial success and therefore are not truly dedicated to their craft (Bourdieu, 1986). This image of the suffering or starving artist is one such figure who recurs in broader discourses of the creative self and allows creatives to distinguish themselves as 'truly' committed to their work – as those who are willing to go to extremes for their work, even against all adversities. Franz Kafka (1948) perhaps embodied this ideal best in his short story titled 'A Hunger Artist'. Despite the dwindling interest of the audience in the 'art of fasting' the hunger artist was unrelenting in his commitment to his art, always blaming the audience, circumstances, or that he had not fasted enough for the lack of appreciation for his work. The creative self in these instances is one who is able to make physical, emotional and monetary sacrifices for their work. Lack of comfort, happiness and pay are normalised as something one must go through in order to construct the ideal creative self. This image of a creator lost in an ideology of his own making also reinforces suffering or forgoing things for the sake of one's work as a potent message facing creative workers.

### **The skilled craftsman**

The last image of a creative worker that can be identified more clearly from the literature still echoes the voice of dedication and commitment to one's work (Anthony, 1977; Becker, 1982; Mills, 1956). However rather than being based on talent or gifts of individuals, this commitment is fastened through the exercise of careful and deliberate care for the development of one's skills (Becker, 1982; Inkson, 1987; Mills, 1956). Narratives of craft in relation to creative work became more salient around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where the 'Arts and Crafts' movement spanned both British and American production as a resistance to industrialisation and what was seen as the de-skilling of workers through strict management control or technologies that diminished necessity of the skilled worker (Inkson, 1987; Lucie-Smith, 1981; Luckman, 2012). The image of the creative self as a skilled craftsman differs from the creative genius not only in that craftwork relies on skills that can be developed rather than mysterious gifts or talents bestowed upon the creative genius (Becker, 1982). The craftsman image historically tends to reflect a broader interest in the functionality of designs and work and less so on the aesthetics of 'art' or creative work for pure expression (Becker, 1982; Lucie-Smith, 1981). The defining of work by its relevance to the needs of others gives

more importance to that which is external to the work – that is determination of the value of the work comes from reactions by those who should use it (Becker, 1982). However craftwork does not remove the aesthetic element but retains the value of the work to be judged as both functional and beautiful allowing craftsmen to retain aspects of self by the way of signature in their works (Becker, 1982).

In the ideal of craftsmanship the craftsman, like the creative genius, is afforded autonomy in determining how works are to be completed (Blauner, 1964; Mills, 1956). This retains a ‘relation between the craftsman and the thing he makes’ (Mills, 1956, p. 220) ultimately understanding how his part relates to the whole and getting enjoyment and meaning from his engagement with his work (Anthony, 1977; Blauner, 1964; Mills, 1956; Sennett, 2008). While the craftsman image retains some of the benefits of genius’ work – such as retaining a great deal of autonomy over one’s work as well as working with aesthetics and the ability to imprint a signature onto one’s work – the two are not unequivocal images of the creative worker.

The above summarises some of the more pronounced images of the creative worker introduced across different texts. The images reflect different discourses and tensions that face creative workers. They also represent some of the different resources and positions available, according to the existing literature, which creative workers may use to make sense of themselves. Each image could be used and introduced in various complex and interwoven ways, sometimes simultaneously adopting these and other non-creative work images to construct a sense of self. In Bourdieu’s (1993) writings on the field of cultural production he describes how these ‘positions’ are the source of struggle in the field of cultural production where producers attempt to constantly define and re-define the boundaries of the field and who or what can be considered to belong to a specific group of cultural producers. Organisations go some way to formalise these activities by advocating certain discourses that legitimize certain positions and not others. How then do individuals working in creative organisations navigate these different images and tensions between the various self-definitions and understandings available to them and what might be the implications of such activity?

### ***Navigating Work***

It is against the backdrop of the images introduced above and other images of the creative self that creative workers develop the various meanings of their work and

themselves. These meanings of work often have implications for ways in which individuals work to live and cope with various challenges they face in their everyday experiences (Taylor, 2013). These images, and other discourses discussed in the previous chapter, therefore are valuable resources for developing the sense of self in relation to work (Taylor and Littleton, 2013; Zanoni, 2017). While the use of these resources is often varied and complex and their untangling in the everyday texts and interactions is not always straightforward (Shotter, 1993) – yet the understanding of these in their context can reveal how individuals work to navigate themselves and their work. Such navigation is not always simple or fixed but can be seen as ongoing accomplishment in everyday experiences which are ‘open to contestation and as productive of fragmented, fluid selves characterised by multiple contradictory narratives as of convergent, stable ones’ (Schultz, Maguire, Langley, and Tsoukas, 2012, p. 4). While some images and discourses prove favourable to some individuals others may prove challenging and at times may be resisted (Elsbach and Flynn, 2013). In organisations where multiple and fragmented discourses are observable, it remains important to understand how experiences are shaped by and appropriated or resisted in the experiences of individuals (Courpasson, 2017). In this way we come to understand how the power that is laden in interactions and encounters with dominant orders or ways of being that can influence individuals’ experiences and their own organisation of meaning (Courpasson, 2017; Zanoni, 2017). Creative workers may adopt some ideas and not others. They may struggle with some aspects or conditions of work which become more salient in their lives (Elsbach and Flynn, 2013; Juuti and Littleton, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). In order to understand these experiences of themselves and their work within a creative organisation, and to theorise the consequences of these, there is a need to examine what meanings and emotions that are brought into their accounts – and to delve deeper in the organisational role in fostering some of these. Organisations support dominant images and discourses that influence these experiences through ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ means (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Heelas, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Uncovering what these means are and how individuals react to these could be used to develop our understanding of the lives of contemporary creative workers and how these may connect to broader more public issues.

Of existing accounts of creative workers’ experiences several go into detail to elaborate the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves and their work. In

their interviews with art college graduates Taylor and Littleton (2013) explored the experiences and views of creative aspirants in their creative identification. These accounts found that creative experiences and selves were not straightforward but rather a 'complex, effortful process to negotiate and reconcile culturally established and local meanings concerning, for example, what it means to do creative work' (Taylor and Littleton, 2013, p. 47). While their accounts predominantly address the narrative construction of creative identities, careers and life stories, Taylor and Littleton (2013) go on to address some of the experiences of struggles with creative work and the rhetorical purposes of certain meanings constructed. For example, they theorise that attraction to creative work may be linked to creative identification but also as part of a self-repair project where individuals are drawn to creative work as an escape from other types of work that they find daunting (Taylor and Littleton, 2013). As with more recent findings in research on creative work (Alacovska, 2017; Duberley, Carrigan, Ferreira, and Bosangit, 2017; Krings, 2006; Larsen, 2017; Luckman, 2015; Taylor, 2010), they describe a gendered element to the experiences of creative workers. Female creative workers experience more pressures to juggle work and life while also struggling to breakthrough gender hierarchies that see them more likely to experience exclusions from creative work (Krings, 2006; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). Other experiences recalled by Taylor and Littleton in their study were those of working hard – often working long hours for little pay while trying to 'do it all'.

These conditions were also observed in the extensive research by David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2008, 2011) introduced in the previous chapter. Their research explored various aspects of creative labour across three different creative industries. One such aspect is the experiences as recalled by workers themselves that address conditions of creative work but also feelings and emotions wrapped up in work. They described how work of those they studied was often insecure, based on short term contracts demanding long working hours, flexibility and often for less than desirable pay. Workers sometimes worked for free or on a freelance basis which involved a great deal of risk taking and instability (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This created feelings of insecurity and self-doubt that the workers shared with the researchers. However, it becomes unclear whether this is a factor relating to creative work more generally or attributable to the precarious nature of the work, with feelings of insecurity also identifiable across non-creative types of precarious labour (Lorey, 2015; Ross, 2008). Lastly there were elements of pleasure and enjoyment as well as feelings of self-

realisation that were experienced as attainable through creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This expression of pleasure was linked to the experience of autonomy and the ability to organise one's own work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Taylor, 2015). The combination of insecurity of employment for the self-employed and freelance workers coupled with bouts of intense feelings of pleasure from work create a sense of ambivalence, one that Rowlands and Handy (2012) describe as an addiction where their 'sense of self was strongly invested in their work' (p. 665). In their study of freelance filmmakers Rowlands and Handy (2012) remarked how 'creative highs' of pleasure were later coupled with negative experiences that had damaging effects on their emotional, financial and physical well-being.

Given these sometimes troubling accounts of strong emotional responses from creative work – how is it that the images and discourses surrounding creative work influence these experiences and how do creative workers navigate these? Examining creative workers organisationally may place these creative selves in context by exploring how they may go about navigating multiple positions and possibilities. One such study, conducted by Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, and Carter (2010) investigated the role of power in the construction of creative selves in one architecture firm. Their study showed how creativity and creative identities were 'constituted as effects of power' (p. 526) and how selves were disciplined through discursive regimes that were used as resources for creative workers' identity negotiations. The study of the architecture firm also showed how discursive regimes around what it meant to be a good employee of the firm set the limits and boundaries of what (and who) could and couldn't be considered creative. They also challenged the ideas of a free-floating and liberal creative based on an image of heroic creative geniuses who were able to sit outside conventions and regimes of power. Instead it was these very regimes that dictated creative workers' behaviours and identification, imposing limits to their creativity as well as ways of working (Brown et al., 2010). The case made it clear that creative identities in creative organisations are negotiated and re-negotiated in an ongoing fashion while being inspired by desires and aspirations of more heroic images.

Similarly Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane and Greig (2012) found that this kind of re-narration of identity was a reaction to tensions experienced by creative workers and their attempts to manage these experiences by re-writing their own narratives in the micro-political landscape. While both of these studies acknowledge the identity work brought on by organisational dynamics, both have failed to address how such experiences affect

the personal and emotional spheres of individuals' lives. More recently, in a forthcoming paper, Ahuja, Heizmann and Clegg (Forthcoming) address the emotional experiences of becoming an architect in creative organisations. While addressing the idealised meanings of what it means to be an architect and the socially constructed and often emotional experiences this fosters they do not frame these in relation to specific circumstances of a single organisation but rather to a group of individuals grouped together by their professional status as young aspirants. By examining a single organisation we can explore how organisational dynamics develop discursive regimes that govern selves and experiences and in turn how creative workers navigate and narrate themselves in this context. By collecting and examining the construction of creative selves and work we can explore what challenges face contemporary creative workers in creative organisations but also the implications of these and their connections to broader public issues.

## ***Summary***

This chapter has reviewed the existing literature and ideas around creative work selves and the experiences of creative workers. The subjective experience, and construction, of selves and emotions may be particularly insightful for understanding troubles, challenges and implications for creative workers but also for understanding the broader issues surrounding creative work or work more generally. Working selves are especially interesting given that work is argued as one of the primary sites where and through which we experience ourselves (Rose, 1989). These experiences are shaped by discourses and images which guide identities. Creative selves are constructed around images of a heroic creative genius; one who accepts sacrifices as a part of creative work; or a craftsperson dedicated to developing skills and producing creative works with functionality. All these images reflect a self-made and enterprising view of creative workers, where they navigate and attempt to work through tensions and contradictions that arise from competing discourses and power relations. Studying these interactions and how workers navigate themselves and their work from an organisational perspective allows us to reveal more about organisational lives of creative workers and what conditions and challenges they may face now and in the future.

## 4. Approach to this Research

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This chapter covers the methodological considerations that have framed this research. In doing so it hopes to offer a careful working through some of the more significant decisions made in the process of my studying of creative workers in the creative organisation. These decisions form not only the patterns, but the materials and seams that compose this thesis. The ambition with this chapter is therefore to move between these pieces and parts in order to expose some of the less obvious ways in which this work has been developed (Marcus and Fischer, 1996) and this complexity's contribution to this final thesis. By narrating this chapter reflexively I recount some of the ways in which I have attempted to weave these pieces and parts together. Despite some of my own reserved scepticism towards the nouvelle vague adoption of all that 'reflexivity' of the confessional tales variety described by Van Maanen (1988), where a highly personalised style dictates 'self-absorbed mandates' (p. 73), I retain the view that without a certain amount of reflexivity from the researcher the work can lose some of its ability to reach and connect with an intended audience. This can also influence its capacity to say meaningful things. By meaningful things here I am referring to ideas that are deemed valuable by readers that improve their engagement with the work and the world. To avoid the pitfalls of the 'self-absorbed' approaches to reflexivity, researchers can incorporate themselves into their research in subtler ways. I hope to work in these subtler ways throughout this chapter, and those that follow, so that I can provide a better understanding of the development of this research and text. In this chapter I plan to fulfil this ambition by reviewing *if* and *how* selves can be made sense of and studied; followed by and emphasis on the importance of the context in which they are studied; a summary of the study undertaken at Alpha Games; the processes of theorising; and finally I finish by reflecting on aspects of textwork that influence this final text.

From the very start of this project the overarching interest has been to explore the experiences of individuals working in a creative organisation and the relation of these experiences to a broader social order. Taking a stance within an interpretive paradigm and adopting what Holstein and Gubrium (2005) have coined the 'interpretive practice' and its view of the social world as precarious rather than fixed and reality as the product of the subjective experiences of individuals (Morgan, 1980). I acknowledge these experiences, which form a part of the social, as constructed in the texts and interactions of individuals. In doing so I also acknowledge that these constructions, as well as



possibly re- and de-constructions are part of a larger politics that play out in the textual and practical accomplishments of individuals which can be evidenced in the texts, claims, stories, and practices which organisational members enact in everyday life. Thereby the study of experiences and private issues of individuals working at Alpha Games can be positioned in the context of the organisational and public sphere to reveal some broader workings of the social (Mills, 1959).

### ***Studying Selves***

Constructed as experiences, narratives, stories, snippets, emotions, - which are constituted through talk, written texts, and bodily performances; the self can be a complicated if not complex target of research agendas. Given also that the self is defined here as an ongoing project that we may only ever glimpse partially and elusively in moments (Gergen, 2011a). Assembling ideas of the self from these parts is a challenging task for any researchers exploring the selves and their construction. Add to this layers of interpretation, the researcher's own perspectives and prior knowledge, the task runs the danger of becoming rather daunting. Yet rather than focusing on pulling all these thoughts and accounts apart, the researcher must create a sense that they 'are blending together, overlapping, and forming a composite, a new creation' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 4). This new creation should not be entirely abstract or removed from the empirical material but rather works to give meaning to all the different voices and experiences heard across the various moments spent with the empirics. The plurality which I employ for my material I also call upon in my methods of study – moving between methods and tools to bring to light the stories at Alpha.

Examining these assumptions and methods ontologically may be one way for a researcher to lay some clarity on this multiplicity. While experiences, narratives, stories, snippets, emotions – and even selves explored as essential or fixed as 'truths' may be useful in functionalist research where the goal is to understand biological mechanisms, this reductionist approach is not useful in understanding how these concepts are derived in the social relations between individuals (Burr, 2015). Rather, this thesis, and my approach to studying these concepts is founded on a social constructionist approach which acknowledges phenomena in the world as created and constructed on the basis of our subjective experiences in each encounter of everyday life (Duberley, Johnson, and Cassell, 2012; Morgan and Smircich, 1980). The social constructionist perspective on knowledge also posits that knowledge is 'historically and culturally specific' (Burr,

2015, p. 9) and that all knowledge creation (including concepts and categories) should be studied in light of their historic and cultural contexts. Further, the role of language is important to the study of constructions. Yet debates remain about the boundaries of language and whether there is a life beyond discourses and language. Other debates also address issues of micro versus macro constructionism and whether it is possible to synthesise these perspectives (Burr, 2015). My position on these aspects is not to consider differences between language and what is beyond as well as micro versus macro as ontologically 'real' distinctions. This is to say that these distinctions themselves are constructed by researchers in the way they work with their material and concepts. The private issues positioned against the public sphere are a means for understanding individual experiences in the context of the social and political dimensions of their construction. More specifically by examining a 'partial piece of the argumentative texture we look also to the broader forms of intelligibility running through the texture more generally' (Wetherell, 1998, p. 403) thereby connecting the micro with the macro (structural) in our analysis and allowing room for critique of the ways in which either of these concepts are constructed, negotiated, and structure the social.

This more synthetic approach to understanding experiences, selves, identities as well as discourses and ideologies as fluid rather than fixed and where the sense of self is fragmented and destabilised as fluid and ever-changing (Duberley et al., 2012). Focus is shifted from the individual as a 'coherent, unique, and, in terms of motivation and cognition, more or less integrated universe' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p. 195). Rather a more relativistic view of reality is proposed where the individuals understanding of their world is limited by the subjectivity they experience in a certain time and space (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). As such this study of selves in creative work combines interpretivist, critical, and post-modernist schools of thought, adopting the paradigmatic pluralism of Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) (and later Kinkoche's (2001, 2005) bricoleur. This paragrammatic approach to my research allows me to avoid becoming a 'hostage to fate' by sticking too loyally or uncritically to one approach (Gabriel, 2002) and by synthesising these approaches - increasing the richness and implications of the study (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Returning to the subject of selves, these form a large part of this project and are represented throughout this quilt-work which is the final text. Yet the process of revealing the multitude of selves and their emotional elements was a task that began in

the process of studying identities. Identities, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, represent selves through meanings and labels that are identifiable from the social. In contrast selves may be harder to place within these schemas of meaning and may be blurry, fuzzy or simply tell about the emotional experiences of individuals. Therefore, the studying of selves includes the reflexive positioning of ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am not’ (identity issues); but also ‘how I feel’ or ‘how *I* feel about *me*’ and relations of the experiencing ‘me’ (self issues). This reflexive activity also tends to be shrouded by emotions; emotions of love, hate, passion, anxiety, guilt, shame, and so on, all may feature in our accounts of ourselves (Denzin, 1985). Emotions keep us in-touch with our behaviour in a way that reflects how we feel about it, our environment and the relation of our sense of self to these things (Giddens, 1991). These emotions are, therefore, valuable resources for the self as they are shared through communicative language.

Language is a source of meanings and a way of making sense and constituting, and selves. Language is central to our communication of experience. In particular, as Giddens (1991) puts it ‘all human experience is mediated – through socialisation and in particular the acquisition of language’ (p. 23). Language becomes the social medium through which we share our experiences. This has become a dominant means through which we study the social world and the ‘turn to discourse’ has overtaken much of the research within the field of organisation studies for well over two decades now. The reason for this popularity is perhaps the acknowledgement that language does not only allow us to represent reality but constructs and constitutes it (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b). Yet the use and analysis of predominantly text based material has its limitations. For example in situations where language may be loosely coupled to meaning and where the subject ‘may be politically conscious language user, telling the right kind of stories to the right audiences at the right moment’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a, p. 1132). This requires vigilance and an alertness from the researcher to other communicative capacities of human beings. These means include – body language, tone of voice when speaking, what is not said, clothing, and other modes of expression not captured by textual language. This material lends itself to the careful observation and annotation by the researcher. Analysis of these nuances can add to working through of interpretations – defining which are less plausible and which are more so, but also adding layers to the narratives in order to provide a ‘thick’ account rich with meaning (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, the idea here is to move beyond a simplistic study of texts and language in

order for the research to be constructed in a rich and more holistic exploration of individuals and their experiences of organisations.

My interest in studying selves, however, moves beyond a descriptive *if* and *how* these selves are constructed – to an interest rather on *why*, *what they mean* and *in what context* they are called upon. As such texts and narratives are juxtapositioned to develop themes and broader interpretations – shifting from the level of the individual to the level of organisation and more sociological phenomena. Therefore, instead of a unabated pursuit of true and ‘real’ selves I try to study the ‘complex, paradoxical, and mysterious qualities of subjectivity’ (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992, p. 5) and their relation to the social circumstances in which they are constructed in order to have a conversation, develop an understanding and move our ideas regarding creative work and creative workers forward.

### **Selves in context**

While ambition and purpose are important ingredients for conducting good quality social research, they are both in danger of being misguided if research is not situated within a broader social milieu (Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen, 2017). This necessitates the production of texts that are relevant, timely and interesting while also answering two different questions simultaneously – the *what* and the *how*. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2005) researchers are often preoccupied with either the *what* of social phenomena (i.e. uncovering or labelling them) or the *how* (exploring their processes of construction). Yet exploring both, and perhaps leaving room for the *why* allows us to re-engage ‘questions concerning the broad cultural and institutional contexts of meaning-making and social order’ through interpretive practice (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005, p. 484). Studying selves in context, therefore, allows us to understand the mechanisms and meanings in the construction of selves in a much richer and informative way. In the case of this study the context is that of a single organisation. Selecting the context of organising and a specific organisation allows me to draw boundaries that focus this research and prevents it from becoming unreasonable or too broad so as to dampen both the meanings and the social value derived from exploring individuals’ experiences.

Exploring the organisational context of Alpha and relating the individuals’ experiences within the organisation is not an attempt to produce some unquestionable truth that exists as part of this organisation or any other organisation. Instead I situate the accounts at Alpha within the existing literature on creative work and creative

workers' experiences allowing interpretations and theorisations to be framed by this literature but also to challenge and pivot away from it in some respects. This literature and other prior knowledge of the reader also plays a significant role in providing the resources to make the judgement and determine research value for understanding creative work and its relation to the goings on in our society. To this end I appreciate C. Wright Mills' views regarding the role of social scientists as one that should 'translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals' (p. 187).

In order to do this, it is important to get close to the sites where these experiences of creative workers might occur. This requires an engagement with the subject of research through observation, talk and prolonged interaction with those researched (Van Maanen, 1979) and the connection of these observations and narratives to the social and political context in which they occur (Watson, 2011). Carefully situating observations and texts gives plausibility to claims and interpretations derived from the material. A richness of details in descriptions can also do much to bring the reader closer to the place of the experiences (Denzin, 1992). However, this research does not attempt to make any claims regarding the 'truth' of experiences that the individuals share or I observe. Rather the construction of this text aims to incorporate my reflections on the role I have in their construction as the author of the text. So as to not privilege my position I try to offer varied narratives of phenomena illustrating both the breadth and depths of experiences which are necessary to strengthen the arguments they support. This grants the ability to situate not only the meanings of experiences but also the discursive practices that may constitute them in a way that speaks to both the individuals as well as the organisational and social contexts to which they belong.

Connecting this study of Alpha to broader societal issues also allows me to position my research between the study of organisational life and sociology. The concern with a diminishing influence of sociology in organisation studies and an increased myopic view is shared by others (cf. Adler, Du Gay, Morgan, and Reed, 2014). Bringing society and sociological theory into the fold of organisation studies is an important development which needs to continue if we are to understand how organisational lives develop and how the phenomena in organisations can be understood as microcosms for phenomena in society more broadly.

## ***Introduction to the Study***

The ethnographic research project began out of a research interest in the discourses of creativity and their relationship to identities of those working in a creative organisation. To be more exact, the objective of my project was interested in examining ‘the interplay between organisational discourses on creativity and individuals’ identity constructions’ (as an extract of my earlier work). My initial formulation of the research problem was around how individuals identified themselves in relation to creativity. My ideas in this formative time were shaped by what I identified as a problem with the existing views held about creativity in the academic literature but also by many practitioners of creative work. Using my own prior understandings and a scan of the literature I noted how creativity was seen as the ‘oil of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Ross, 2008, p. 32) and elixir that when applied correctly only led to growth and success for organisations. Creativity was treated as an object to be acquired, possessed and applied, while any failures of creativity were reduced to its improper management or application. The predominant view of creativity was, therefore, as something largely manageable, enduring and heroic (Bilton, 2010) rather than potentially uncontrollable, temporal, or destructive. This problematization of the concept of creativity led me to wonder – what is really going on for those that work closely with the concept in their everyday life? Was the picture really as rosy and optimistic as many creativity scholars would have us believe? That coupled with the rather limited empirical research on individuals engaged in creative work and creative identification at that time set the groundwork for my ideas and for my study at Alpha Games.

The research carried out in the study was initially, in terms of during the times of fieldwork, largely focused around the concept of creativity. While my interest in ‘creativity’ itself as the focus of my research would later wane when emotions and reactions to work, self and work conditions began to feature more dominantly in the narratives, it remains central to how individuals construct themselves and their relation to their work at Alpha. The discourses around creativity which initially emerged in my conversations with individuals continue to feature in my material but play a much more ‘second-order’ role in the story. As time went on and I became submerged in the material I tried to look for things that challenged my own and others’ assumptions about what was going on in order to find interesting phenomena to account for (Davis, 1971). The most salient themes that ended up emerging is the phenomena described in the following chapters. The fact that creative work, in particular at Alpha, allowed a sort of escape

from the dead and meaningless relation to work that has been so pronounced in recent research was particularly unexpected. A love for work replaced the meaninglessness of work for individuals. The new direction allowed me to hone my material in explaining why this might be the case, and that, again counterintuitively it may be simultaneously beneficial and problematic for individuals. Yet I believe that this work still speaks to my original interest in the relation of creativity to individuals if by providing an empirical ‘peek-in’ to the experiences of those working with creativity in a creative organisation. I thereby remain interested in the topic and I hope this thesis still speaks largely to workers’ experiences in a creative organisation.

### **Alpha Games**

Conducting any research requires the researcher to draw boundaries to their research that guide them when making decisions throughout the research process (Van Maanen, 1983). Such boundaries do not often remain fixed but are markers allowing the researcher to make judgements about the things that they believe will increase the quality of the work. For the purposes of studying creativity discourses and identity constructions of individuals I began to consider the type of contexts where this relation may be the most salient. In particular, I came across the literature recently starting to focus on what was termed ‘the creative industries’. (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Townley et al., 2009). What further made this an interesting context for the study of identities is that very little was written about creative workers with O’Connor (2010) identifying that ‘at this stage it is hard to say who these people are, how they identify themselves and what skills they might have or need’ (p.63). Following from my organisational interests I got quickly to searching for organisational settings in the creative industries that may house creative workers who may be particularly interesting to study. A study by Movitz and Sandberg (2009) attracted me to the Swedish interactive media sector and its strong engagement with discourses around creativity. I believed that an in-depth exploration of one such large organisation was needed in order to understand more about ‘what is going on in the creative organisation?’ and ‘how do people identify in relation to discourses of creativity?’.

My search of the Swedish interactive media sector led me to Alpha, a major video game development studio in Sweden. I approached Alpha in early April, 2014. Initially meeting with the Studio Head, Lucas in early May. We met on a warm spring afternoon in Lucas’ office and spent an hour discussing my project, access and resources I would

require. We also addressed the importance of ‘creativity’ at Alpha – which I had already gleaned from their website that lamented the fact that ‘creativity is key’ for the organisation. We agreed on the terms of my access at Alpha and that participation in my research would be voluntary for individuals. Lucas was warm and receptive to my research and what I would be doing at Alpha, I felt no hesitation from him and a very open attitude towards research and researchers (something I had been warned not to expect). The fit of Alpha to my research objectives felt overwhelmingly positive both with the depth of material I would have access to and the rather interesting initial impressions of the organisation.

### ***Fieldwork***

It was in the autumn of 2014 that I began the fieldwork on a larger scale. I had a desk at the organisation, began attending weekly meetings and met several characters early on who expressed a keen interest in my project. For the subsequent seven months I visited the organisation on a weekly basis – conducting interviews and attending meetings. I collected documents and made observational notes as I made my way around the building. The observations and texts collected during this time allowed me to get closer to the experiences of individuals at Alpha as well as garnering a wider understanding of the organisation and its practices.

These materials formed part of the organisational ethnography I conducted over seven months across 2014 and 2015. The primary source of materials was the observations and conversations had with people at Alpha. I looked and listened for ways in which individuals construct and sustain recognisable and meaningful features of the social world (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). There is a particular interest for constructionist ethnographers on the capturing communicative as well as interactive settings of interest ‘as well as settings as scenes in which reality construction *work* is taking place’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, p. 385, authors' emphasis). It is therefore most important that notes taken during time spent in these settings are rich and full of details. In particular, I took it upon me to note phrases and words said as well as capture photographs of the settings and activities. Often times my notes on a single one-hour event would exceed 20 A5 pages of scribbles. Other times, at lunches with individuals or other informal interactions I found it cumbersome or distracting to sit with a notebook and found that a more ‘natural’ conversation occurred where I could later, as soon as it was feasible, write up my notes and observations. These notes were dated, coded by



individuals present, location, and organised by event, be it meeting, interaction, or interview. Overall I collected over 200 pages of fieldnotes from observations and 200 pages of notes during interviews.

Individuals were also asked to volunteer for interviews and a brief outline about my research was sent company-wide. Overall I conducted 41 interviews spread out across the seven months I spent at Alpha with an average week consisting of two to three interviews. All 41 interviews lasted between 40 and 100 minutes with the average interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. I made a particular effort to carry out my interviews in a very open and responsive way – somewhat informal and allowing the interviewee to guide the conversation more often than myself. Despite this the interviews were not entirely unstructured and usually followed a pattern that progressed across four main themes (with great variance on the amount spent on each theme dependent on the interviewees interest and responses). These four themes usually began with me asking about (1) interviewee's background and story, before moving on to (2) creativity and the self; (3) issues with creativity; and finally (4) creativity and the organisation. I was not strict to follow the questions I had set out for each theme and merely guided the interviewee on to the next question once I felt we had exhausted a particular topic.

What came through more naturally rather than contrived was an interest for interviewees to share quite personal, at times, troubling narratives of themselves and their experiences. While I admit I have a very casual style of interviewing and am not interested in following very strict methods of interviewing but one where I empathised and expressed feelings and thoughts more openly through a more conversational style (Fontana, 2001; Fontana and Frey, 2005). This openness led to individuals sharing with me not only the personal and troubling narratives but accompanying these with emotions and stories of love, hope, distrust, unhappiness, discouragement, tribulations and even at times their desires and plans to leave the organisation. The ease and comfort of the interviewees during the process let me carry out much more in-depth interviewing which allowed me to grasp multiple layers of an individual's life-world (Fontana, 2001; Johnson, 2001). Later in organising these accounts and narratives I combined my careful notes from the interview with a reflexive pragmatism in working through and juxtaposing communicative (expressions, tone of voice, body language) as well as textual material in making a 'conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles' (Alvesson, 2011, p. 106). This took place during the interview as well as later while listening to and transcribing the 41 audio recorded interviews. When

listening to the audio I also tried to pick up auditory clues which I had not noticed previously and added to the richness of my interpretations.

Before I move on I should also mention the collection of audio-visual material (photographs and watching of company videos) as well as organisational documents. These included both publicly available sources, for example the organisation's website, magazine and newspaper articles - as well as internal documents, those produced for internal distribution only. The inclusion of these as material for my research provided a richer understanding of the dynamics of organisational life (Lee, 2012). These materials were not peripheral to my work but rather central in developing my theorising and how I made sense of and later arranged my material. For example, looking at the photographs of game posters, cardboard cut-outs of video game characters, lounge areas may have been interpreted as part and parcel of video game work, but looking closer at the colours chosen, layout of furniture, and positioning of posters gave a feeling that this should be a 'fun' workplace. In my theorising, in combination with the other material, I came to understand this attitude towards 'fun' as part of the ethos or culture of the organisation.

### ***Theorising the Story***

Data analysis was conducted by looking for patterns of meaning. Analysis began with a review of fieldnotes, images, documents and interview notes to broadly look for emerging patterns. A second analysis of the interviews took place during transcription – where notes were taken during the listening of the interview to note down any changes in tone or emphasis of voice where the intended meaning could be interpreted as different to how it was written in the transcribed text. A third stage of analysis took place using data analysis software to analyse the notes and interview texts into meaningful categorisations. Using this, I was able to code texts at several different levels capturing different understandings of workers' experiences and the organisation.

Many if not all of the organisational members interviewed talked about the relation to others in terms of their work or their construction in the meaning of work and creativity. These were coded in several different nodes including 'importance of other-relations', 'experience of creative people' 'others as 'creative/non-creative', these were eventually organised into a higher order node of 'relationship to other' which formed one of the first major themes from the research. A second theme major theme were the 'conditions-experience of work' as constructed by the interviewees and those observed during observations – this theme captured 'description of work', 'feedback on work' as

well as ‘negative experiences of work’. A third meta-theme focused on the self and captured narratives and stories of the self as well as incidents of identity work, insecurity and other constructions of the self. Two more meta-themes emerged from the data, one that focused on organisation including the ‘experience of organisation’, ‘organisational processes’, and ‘reflections on environment and practices’; and a second that focused on the concept of creativity including how it was defined, reasons for its formation and its comparison and contrast to other concepts such as ‘business’. Working with these five meta-themes continued through iterations between theory and material like which I experienced as ‘bringing binoculars into sharper focus, or gradually adding light to a darkened room’ (Weick, 1989, p. 518) or moving between parts of narratives and a sense of a whole phenomenon in a hermeneutic fashion. Through multiple readings of the materials and iterations I focused in on a particular mystery (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) that I witnessed during one of my observations and was able to develop the following breakdowns and theorising in response.

The quality of interpretative work lies in the meaning making between original material and interpretive practice – what I understand as the hermeneutic interpretive practice. There are two relations here that may remain hidden in the hermeneutic weaving – the relation between the researcher and the material and the relation of the material to its context (other material). The latter may be easier to derive by moving between different texts and understandings in order to build an adequate depth to give the writing up of the research a quality of meaning (more on this ‘depth’ later). The former is rather more complicated – to avoid moving backwards into an object-subject dichotomy afforded by classical hermeneutics (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Prasad, 2002) it is easiest to say that there is no answer to how this *should* be done. Making explicit all the steps of working with the research are not always easy as often the researcher themselves cannot be aware of all the elements that go into making their interpretation. Subjectivity cannot always be accounted for. Instead it is clear that the researcher can offer understandings that frame the research in certain ways, which evolve in their interaction with the research. In this respect research presents itself as an *abductive* process. This abduction implies that the research process ‘alternates between (previous) theory and empirical facts whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p. 4). These iterations between material and theory which inform interpretations and insights, that ultimately develop social theory, describe the process of theorising (Swedberg, 2016)

In tackling some of the mysteries of the process of theorising we can return to hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle – which is an evolving process of understanding where despite the repetitive movement through the circle the inputs are never equal. My workings in the circle with this surely began long before I reached out to Alpha. The development of my understanding began with my reading theories early on in this research process – identity, organisation theory, creativity theories, methodology. The fieldnotes I wrote would undoubtedly be informed by my previous understandings of the theory and a developing understanding of what exactly was going on there. As I transcribed each interview I would start to connect talk and narratives with things I had read in the established literature, starting to read things like clues ready to decipher a bigger problem. I started to work with themes in the reading and re-reading of the material, which undoubtedly were informed by my coincidental reading of various theories. While these themes began as the grouping of claims across texts – once they had been formed I attempted to re-read the materials while asking myself the question – ‘what exactly is surprising here?’. Working with the mystery-making techniques of Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, 2011) I began to look for clues and narratives that would rouse my interest and in turn reveal some consistent problems or challenges that demanded to be written about. What resulted was the ordering of themes and materials into a hierarchy of interpretations.

This hierarchy of interpretations attempts to work rationally through a number of possible interpretations that provide for a richer and creative analysis of the material (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). By examining the thematised data through this plurality the process increases the theoretical possibilities that could be used to explain the phenomena. This depth of analysis avoids generating theories that hover too closely to the empirical material and attempts to not only categorise abstract observations but to construct what Geertz (1973) calls a ‘thick description’. Thick description does not only speak of a text that describes but also to the arrangement of the text. Such careful and deliberate arrangement allows us to build by shifting our interpretations across the various levels of a reflexive approach (Geertz, 1973). Here my ambition has not only been to make explicit a large diversity of possible interpretations so as to offer a thorough and perhaps imaginative work (Weick, 1989) but also arrange the narratives and layers of meaning so that the reader retains adequate space to make and manage their own imaginative interpretive work and engage with the material.

## ***Writing Voices and their Stories***

One of the many things that have preoccupied my time during this project is the development of a literary consciousness about writing this research text (textwork) and the story that my material affords me to tell as well as my theorising of it. All narratives, actions, observations provide us with a plethora of plausible and interesting ways to assemble, represent, construct and relay the meanings we interpret from our research.

In many cases this ambition can be a particularly difficult one to fulfil. I struggled often here myself with the textwork that puts together a fairly academic while also interesting work. While much of this thesis has been written so as to contextualize the research problem and show the relations at play in enough detail, I have also put considerable thought in the engagement of the reader with this work. Perhaps this reflects my own growing literary consciousness guided by that of others – including the work of James Clifford and George Marcus in their text *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) where they extended the exploration of ethnographic practice beyond the ‘interpretation of cultural ‘texts’ but to their relations of production’ (Clifford, 1986, p. 13). Here the interest has moved from what Gabriel (2013) labels a ‘logico-scientific knowledge’ to a ‘narrative knowledge’. The difference between these two forms of knowledge is in their engagement with truth, the former clinging to a view of researcher as scientist producing real and objective accounts, which represent real experiences, they encountered ‘out there’. The latter acknowledging that representing fieldwork is tied in the messy and often crossing the objective-subjective boundaries of writing that is shaped by the political and historical contexts of the writer and whose purpose may therefore be other than representing an objective ‘truth’ (Clifford, 1986).

A large part of the purpose of such non-functional work is to transcend our existing knowledge. This transcendence occurs in interactions with texts that inspire reflexivity and critical challenging of our existing assumptions in order to build new theories and knowledge of the social world (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). The purpose of social science research, in my interpretation, is in one form is to develop and encourage discussion of a plurality of views which in turn challenge each other and our understanding so we can develop better theories to make sense of the social. Some of this talk has emerged in the writings on public sociology. A perspective on sociology which attempts to take ‘knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles’ (Burawoy, 2005, p.5). This involves engaging academic work and products with an audience outside of the

academic sphere – a public who reflects and digests the stories and texts social researchers produce. Communication and writing become central for the publically engaged academic.

Yet with a focus on the textwork of writing up the stories and story of this work comes an often heightened responsibility to those whose voices are represented in the text (Czarniawska, 1999; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This responsibility includes an ethical element that demands a level of care in writing up narratives – especially considering authors’ privileged positions relative to those who are written about (Van Maanen, 1995; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). This means showing a variety of voices in a way that acknowledges and works through both obvious and subtle contradictions and challenges to any dominant plot (Czarniawska, 1998, 1999). This means showing even a single individual from various perspectives and depths and acknowledging that while the researcher is carrying out a political act in the organisation of the narratives, the voices themselves have ‘political clout’ (Czarniawska, 1999). In showing further respect and for ensuring the anonymity of those I spoke with I have provided pseudonyms for all those represented by this work. I have also anonymised the organisation as I do not feel that revealing the name of the organisation adds significantly to what is being said here – rather I feel that the voices of the workers bring the organisation sufficiently to life in a way that brandishes it as a contemporary creative work organisation.

This does not mean that the writing of stories should only involve a literal repetition of what was said, rather a researcher has a professional duty to interpret the meanings of these statements as an understanding of the broader system to which they belong (Czarniawska, 1999). This gives the researcher room for interpretation, but the quality of such interpretation is increased by the reflexive working of the researcher’s role in the interpretation and the consideration of ‘how their privileged position is entwined in the construction of their own selves and those of their authorial ‘Others’’ (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 470). While I do not go about this by writing up highly confessional accounts of myself in the field, I hope that the reflexive nature of this chapter has revealed my own working through and weaving of this research project. It is intended to bring forth the complexities and decisions made in doing the research work involved with this project and reveal in details how this research was navigated but also some of the decisions behind the suturing of this final text.

## *Summary*

In this chapter I have reviewed some of the ideas and decisions that have gone into producing this work. This reflexive tale has further addressed some of the issues around studying selves and emotions at work in the creative organisation, namely in acknowledging the complexity of studying these topics and the need to situate these against the social and political context in which they are constructed. Moving through this chapter I have shared the organisation of my ideas throughout this study. I have also recalled here, in a slightly confessional way, my working with the materials – both during my time in the field as well as in the times of theorising and developing the story of the creative workers at Alpha. Ultimately this story is not my own and I attempt to acknowledge and show a depth to the individuals and voices collected in the following chapters. In doing so I recognise my role in forming and shaping the following narratives through my interpretive practice, but also accept that these are workings of stories that were afforded to me by the highly reflexive and open individuals I came across during my time at Alpha.

## 5. The Artist in the Factory

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It was a cold and rainy Wednesday morning outside the doors of Alpha's offices. Numbers began to fill the old textile works at the heart of Stockholm's archipelago. With a flash of an employee badge to one of the regular receptionists at the welcome desk, they began their ascent of the myriad of stairwells leading to the eight floors of open office space. To the left of the reception a visitor area with bright yellow and green pod couches and several meeting and conference rooms painted in an assortment of vibrant colours. To the right and moving away from the entrance and first stairwell - an open plan industrial-but-modern kitchen-dining area with orange walls and modern seating. Directly adjacent, an office encased in glass – a place for HR staff and activities. Hovering above the dining area and facing the office, a six-foot latest technology screen, playing on a continuous loop the weekly updates, introduction of new recruits, the occasional inspirational quote and news about upcoming parties. The weekly meeting at 9am meant a hustle for the morning cups of java in the kitchen. As talk in the 200-odd person meeting turned from a photo review of the 'best moments in the studio' to ideas about the placement of vultures in their latest release to set the right mood, I took a glance down at my own mug. On it are strategically placed quotes that echo some of the humanistic ideals of contemporary workplaces 'we can always make it better . . . success comes from creating the best games, having the best people, and providing the best work environment', it read.

Much of this talk of '*having the best*' and '*being the best*' was visible at Alpha. I often heard people speaking of hiring 'experts' in their field – those that had specific skills that were 'best in the world' and being specifically picky about the new recruits (putting them through a battery of tests was emphasised as particularly important). The agenda of 'fun at work' was also salient. '*Providing the best environment*' reflected the fun and playful workplace with its funky décor, drawings and cardboard cut-outs of video game characters scattered around the building, break out rooms named after Star Wars planets, gaming areas, pool tables, and 'epic' parties organised on site on regular occasions. It all had a familiar ring to it – in particular the study of Razorfish by Andrew Ross in the early 2000s where the goal was to 'satisfy the internal client' with '[an] in-house masseur, video-gaming room, gym membership discounts, regular social excursions, and some very famous parties' (p. 73). These ideals of post-industrial workplaces in the new knowledge economy are that of a fun workplace that appears to



nurture feelings of autonomy and authenticity, as well as the emotional well-being of the worker against the cold pressures of the industries that came before (Kellner and Heuberger, 1992). As we have seen so far, this need to nurture the individual is particularly relevant in creative organisations where value is dependent on the specialised and immaterial labour of creative workers rather than the divided and de-skilled working of material goods in the industry of yesteryear.

These ideas attempt to fix individuals as central to creative production. In the first half of this chapter I explore how this prized individual is constructed through these discourses and ideologies encountered at Alpha. The second half of the chapter reveals a rather discrepant picture in the experiences of those working at Alpha. Rather than at the glamorous heights of modern work, workers experience themselves as on the cusp of the factory floor. As production on the studio's blockbuster game pushes into its final stage so too do experiences of depersonalised and routinised work, along with a general sense of the de-familisation of the studio environment. Altogether, these experiences, along with being overworked and underpaid, reflect how while being built around ideals and fantasies of nurturing creative individuals, in everyday experiences these notions are rather starkly subdued.

### ***The Individual at Heart***

Facing the 'problem of work' in the 60s and 70s, where a growing separation of the meaning of work from work itself followed by a growing worker disengagement with work, had created the foundations for a number of theorists to contend the ways to draw management focus towards the individual and the self (Du Gay, 1996). This movement called to give the worker more liberties, increasing worker responsibilities, autonomy and creativity in the workplace (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This also called for an attempt to escape highly bureaucratised and formalised ways of working that reflected these former views of the Fordist era, where work was primarily seen as a means to an end – for example for the receipt of income to fund the pleasures beyond work that gave life meaning. The new management focus on the individual and integrating worker needs and desires as a part of work had the hopes of integrating the worker more directly with their work, increasing engagement and commitment (Heelas, 2002). Nowhere, perhaps, is this process reliant on worker identity more important than in production where significant dependence is on the immaterial – the knowledge or exercise of skills of the worker (Fleming and Mandarini, 2009). These knowledge and skills are essential for

production value in the worlds of the creative worker employed in the creative organisation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). As such, in the ideals that occupy it, the individual worker is positioned as a valued and central member to the worlds of creative work. I observed how these ideals were discussed openly and enthusiastically throughout my time at Alpha and share these with you in the sections that follow.

### **Agency, ownership and the autonomous worker**

One of the initial things that struck me as people shared their experiences at Alpha with me was the number of people who emphasised that Alpha was a place with a relatively low level of hierarchy. Many described the organisation as ‘flat’ and attempting to maintain familial atmosphere where most seniors were constructed as approachable and friendly:

The thing is that the organisation is trying to do their best to keep that family atmosphere here at Alpha. We don’t have a traditional managers’ hierarchy . . . like that there is a studio head, top managers, directors, role directors. [Instead] here at Alpha the managers and HR are trying to avoid this as much as possible and it’s working actually, at least for this moment. I would be able to say it for sure when they release this project.

*Connor, Programmer*

The project that Connor refers to is one of the highly anticipated blockbuster games produced at the studio and commissioned by its owner company, Grassroots. This game is what people in the industry call a triple A game, meaning it has the highest budget in game production, but also expectations for a large number of sales. As described earlier, work at Alpha was broken down by projects and then divided into specialised teams. Each team has a team lead who is responsible for the orientation of the team towards certain targets. These goals and targets were set by the production and creative team – led by the creative director, who was responsible for the vision for the game by co-ordinating the ideas for how the game should develop. Despite this structural distance between workers and the creative director, he was described as particularly approachable and friendly:

He’s very good in that way you can talk to him by the coffee machine or just show him something . . . He has a very good attitude to that kind of thing . . . You know people can just show him ideas . . . so he is one of the reasons . . . One of the good guys who promotes a very

friendly atmosphere. So the right attitude amongst the sort of people with power, you know the directors and leads and those kind of people . . that helps a lot.

*Ray, Programmer*

For Ray the approachability of senior members of staff is important and helps him feel satisfied with his work and working at Alpha. In contrast to the ‘good guy’ creative director Ray later constructed the bad guys as the process obsessed individuals who distribute design guides, call multiple meetings and follow an iteration heavy processes which according to Ray “*sucks the fun out of it*”<sup>2</sup>. Instead he stressed approaches to developing ideas that emphasise individual initiative and a do-it-yourself attitude that sits outside of the boundaries of the formal structures and processes of the studio:

So I think it’s better, if you have some idea, it’s better to talk to some people and ask “can we just prototype this?”. And maybe you can go in on a Saturday and prototype something for a couple of hours and if it seems a good idea when you’ve tested it yourself and you haven’t involved any sort of bureaucratic people then maybe you can show it to some person on the project who has some decision power.

*Ray, Programmer*

Rather than being discouraged, this kind of individual agency was described as desirable and something that those senior in the organisation wanted to nurture:

[It’s] very important to me that new leads and new directors learn how to direct and lead in a good way that always appeals to that ‘give people ownership, give people some leeway, give them a sense of “this is mine and I have the opportunities to take it further”’ so that it’s very easy for people [to do that]. And that means you need to have a solid vision, you need to tell that vision to people you need to allow people to make that vision theirs - which might change it a bit . . and then you need to accept that. And you can’t tell people exactly what to do . . then you will get results that are always 80% of what you’ve told them. If you build them up and you trust them and you respect their work you won’t get exactly what you asked for . . but you’ll get something good in return. I mean that kind of creative leadership we try to nurture a lot.

*Frank, Producer*

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<sup>2</sup> Text in italics are direct quotes from interview texts by the individuals named or direct excerpts from other organisational texts.

For Frank, the individual creative is the driver of success. Giving liberty, autonomy and encouraging ownership of work is not only important for individuals to accept but also for those leading them. His tone idealises the individual and goes against heavily structured work processes – “*you can’t tell people exactly what to do*”. This articulation constructs the idea that individuals should have power to determine how they will complete their work as enterprising and autonomous workers.

The importance of taking ownership and initiative for work was also reinforced by talk of a meritocratic culture in the studio – which once again favours the individual as the driver of organisational changes and initiatives over more top down and formal means. This links Ray’s earlier comment about prototyping an idea and presenting it to someone with decision power and believing that if the idea is the best it will get accepted as part of this meritocratic cultural ideal:

Since we really want to give everyone a chance to grow and to make sure we make the best games possible we work hard to maintain a meritocratic culture at the studio. It’s really about the best idea.

*Studio website*

This meritocratic ideal was also discursively constructed in one on one talks with individuals. Many stated that they recognised the efforts from the Studio Head and others at the top to empower individuals to take initiatives and make decisions, not only for the blockbuster project, but also for developing and sharing new game ideas. This particular breadth to the idea of meritocracy was not, however, shared by everyone at Alpha. Frank’s construction of meritocracy saw it as more bound by the limits of worker’s area of expertise, so that individuals would take ownership of their own work and at the same time stay out of the work of others – a kind of bounded meritocracy:

I want to build a meritocracy . . but that means that the artist is the guy owning the art . . and it's very rare that the artist has an idea about the story or about some other stuff [not related to him] . . . so when we say meritocracy . . in its manifestation it's ‘okay . . you know this best . . how would you do it?’ And we give people the opportunity to have ownership. Which is giving them meaning and creativity for their part but in this framework you can own your work. And we are trying to achieve that with everyone across the board.

*Frank, Producer*

Frank's version of meritocracy is one in which the "*artist*" or creator is given ownership to make decisions. In this way individuals are lauded for their enterprising activity and 'owning' their work. This emphasis on the individual making decisions for their work was further explained by Marcus, a producer, who spoke of his earlier experiences on the project when he would be given 'x' amount of work and told "*however you want to solve it . . do whatever you want*". According to Marcus, Alpha is a unique place where you can work in such a way:

I would get tasks on a daily basis that were pre-determined . . And I felt creative solving them in a sense because the tools that Alpha provided. It's not like in another studio where they force you to use one specific tool. When Alpha built its own tech they decided that the tools that people used to make content that goes into the game, those tools should be up to the person who is going to use them. So some people have joined the organisation . . and a big bonus for them when they joined was 'okay I get to use my favourite software which I've never been able to use anywhere else, where I'm comfortable, and where I feel I can create anything I want'.

*Marcus, Producer*

This idea that there would be a pipeline of work where the individual is given "*pre-determined tasks*" to just check off is not too different to findings in other studies on creative games studios where work is done through the pipeline and milestone process, ticking off tasks as the project progresses (Thompson et al., 2016). Yet in contrast to the 'tightly managed process' described in Thompson et al.'s (2016, p. 325) game studios, Marcus experiences the process at Alpha as individuals being entrusted with the autonomy to make decisions about how to complete tasks set for them. He also states he observed how this autonomy was seen as a '*big bonus*' for people that allowed them to feel comfortable and be creative – constructing this as desirable and ideal.

This individual agency is further reinforced in the text of the values of the owner company, Grassroots. In their value statements, distributed to staff they emphasise the 'entrepreneurial spirit' where "*teams and individuals are encouraged to take initiative in their daily jobs and ownership for their projects*". This appears to relax the need for certain processes to be followed and rather underscores the importance of the outcome and product of work as the source of work valuation. These discourses of ownership and autonomous work, as well as outcome of work as a source of valuation at Alpha also reflect the norms found in other types of expert-based work systems (Alvesson, 2004).

The stress on the outcomes and products of work, and the individual's agency in producing these, situate the individual at the core of the production of value for the organisation. In keeping, individuals described themselves in their talk as the instrumental and enterprising 'creators' or 'creatives', which were identities they particularly aspired to.

### **Fantasies of the artist**

The idea of individual as central to creativity is a longstanding belief which I introduced in chapter three under the guise of the image and myth of the creative genius or 'auteur'. While this heroic image of the creative individual has long been questioned by social theorists (cf. Negus and Pickering, 2004) it became conspicuous as part of the desires and ideals of the workers I spoke with. According to Grassroots' own corporate materials, creativity requires "*imaginative skill . . . richness of ideas and originality of thinking*" something that delivers something new, and once again, puts the onus on the individual in delivering this desired creative novelty. This onus on the individual taking ownership and creating value through their 'imaginative skill' further propels these ideals of the 'artist' (I shall stick to the term *artist* here which I take to mean the image of an artistic genius discussed in chapter four, rather than alluding to a particular type of skill i.e. associated with fine arts). This discursive validation by the organisation of the societal ideologies around the creative genius promotes and upholds this image of the lone heroic creative individual as a powerful one with which workers were encouraged to identify. Not surprisingly then, I was able to observe how this image of the artist was repeatedly constructed and fantasised over by many of the workers at Alpha.

More specifically the artist was constructed as a mythical individual who was to be shrouded with respect for their creations. I saw this when individuals, in their talk, idolised certain well known figures, referring to their work in highly romanticised ways. Among them directors – David Lynch, Francis Ford Coppola, Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese – people who "*revolutionised the way we thought of films*" in one way or another. Following the "*Hitchcock model*" or being the "*Francis Ford Coppola of video games*" were constructed as aspirations. Scientists too were a source for aspiration – Einstein, Stephen Hawking; but also musicians like Bob Dylan popped up in our talks as exemplary of how something was achieved or overcome. Ray, in particular gave several of these examples which revealed how much this idea of the sole creative 'artist' featured in his sensemaking. One of the examples he gave is of how

Picasso had been a visionary who had succeeded in breaking the norms of how painting was done:

At the beginning of the 20th century we had people like Picasso who just said like ‘screw that thing with perspective and depth I’m just going to paint a flat surface with three naked women and there’s no depth or shadows or anything, it’s more like an abstract kind of painting’. And I think when he showed this people were like ‘what? what is this? It’s strange and it’s not art . . there is no perspective, and there is no lighting, what is this mess?’. And then you know time goes by and later on he’s a genius because he broke with something . . he broke ground and made something new and unique.

*Ray, Programmer*

Later when describing his work as “*about making something really beautiful*” he emphasised that the ‘artist’ could overcome any limitations by collaborating with others who were skilled in their areas just like Bob Dylan had done:

And you have that in music you know a good musician doesn’t really have to be able to write good songs so maybe I can think about . . I mean Bob Dylan isn’t necessarily a great guitarist but he writes songs . . He has three chords and great lyrics but the emotion he has in his songs is amazing but he’s not that fantastic guitar player but then you have other musicians who are great craftsmen and they can play it and really heighten it and bring it to life.

*Ray, Programmer*

To Ray these were examples of individuals who had succeeded in overcoming adversity and were successful with their creativity. As I mentioned in chapter three, this particular romanticised view of the artist has prevailed in other areas of cultural and creative work where the mystique and romance of the identity of the artist has served as a motivation for people to overcome various difficulties (McRobbie, 1998) - including a lack of appreciation for their work. The myth of this ‘artist’ figure promotes the beliefs that individuals have special skills or talents, that the work done by these people reflects this specialness, and that ‘by inspecting the work we see that someone special made it’ (Becker, 1982, p. 14).

Individuals working at Alpha toyed with the idea that they fulfilled this fantasy of the artist who is special or unique:

I think I'm very unique . . I paint scenarios in my head all the time . . good and bad. But the weird thing is that I try to hide behind it for a long time and maybe it's a good thing . . I always get like . . I still get very upset and passionate.

In all honesty of course I feel very different and people tell me also a lot that I'm super different and that's a typical 'Gordon' thing to say.

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Gordon was particularly self-aware to his uniqueness and how others also saw him as “*different*”. He attributed this difference to what made him creative but also why he was there “*I’m paid to be creative [...] I can produce creative ideas*”. His unique way of thinking was something he could offer - stating that “*people just bring me in because they want my perspective on something*” which reinforced his belief in himself as agentic and instrumental in the developments in the game. He also found it bizarre, or strange that others could not match his way of thinking or the speed with which he came up with good ideas:

And you know . . that doesn’t really come . . that doesn't really happen to everyone . . I realised. To me that's weird. So a lot of the times when I say something in a meeting or when I have an opinion . . people - it's new to them, but to me it's obvious. It's like 'but that's . . I'm not even thinking now . . I'm not even trying . . I'm just saying the first bad idea that pops into my head'. But then people think "oh that's good" but just the first thing . . because it's obvious. Everyone could have seen that right? But no. So to me it's umm . . I don't know . . to me it's just what I . . (laughs).

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Gordon’s narrative here positions him as a unique individual when it comes to coming up with ideas. He doesn’t even try, while others struggle to come up with what he considers to be obvious ideas. He constructs himself in such an extraordinary position that he laughs as he struggles to make sense of the situation and how there could be such a discrepancy between himself and others.

Others like Connor, a programmer, furthered these types of fantasies by describing their colleagues as artists who are “*kind of like celebrities*” that “*know they are in the limelight all the time*”. This specialness was also incorporated into their roles and how individuals could differentiate themselves from those who are not as uniquely talented or as creative as the artist or “*real genius*”:



If it's a real genius, he can orientate himself by having a taste or rhythm. For a programmer it's having a special way of thinking and you educate yourself in that way. And of course there are some people like let's say a musician, he has randomly one great hit and then all of his other songs they are completely rubbish just because he guessed [that one time]. That would also work of course . . . But can we call this person creative in this way? Because we can put a monkey on the piano and a monkey can play something for 10,000 hours - one piece of button hitting will be a good song – but is a monkey creative in this way? I don't think so.

*Connor, Programmer*

The monkey cannot be deemed creative enough to be identified as the artist. To be a 'real genius' requires more than training repeatedly on one task for an extended period of time. Connor's narrative hints at the exclusivity of being creative. To be creative one must have more than skills but a "*special way of thinking*" or "taste", something that you cannot acquire easily according to Connor. He also makes the distinction between these rare and gifted geniuses and those that were lucky with a "*one hit wonder*", meaning that there are those that lack these unique and special qualities – once again reinforcing the position of the artist as exclusive.

This rarity around the desired and ideal identity of the artist was also constructed consistently across many of my conversations and in observations - with one individual claiming it is as rare as 10-15 people in the world who can be called a "*creative genius*" in the gaming world. This exclusivity of the creative worker as artist is observed in more general discourses of creative work (Negus and Pickering, 2000). What is of interest is that these fantasies of the artist are prevalent at Alpha, despite the appearance of the projects as organised collaborations between different individuals and teams.

In this section I have explored how the ideological discourses are developed at Alpha which portray the individual as a central subject in the organisation. The discourses of agency, ownership, as well of an autonomous and enterprising subject manifested as the ideology of the 'artist' produce and maintain a belief that the individual is prized and at the heart of the organisation. This is reinforced by the organisation wide talk, that of seniors but also in the constructions of workers of themselves and their roles. This centralisation of focus and discourses on the individual may be expected in an organisation where the products of which are largely dependent on the 'communicative and emotional capacities' of the individual to produce immaterial goods (Gill and Pratt,

2008, p. 8). What differs here also, in comparison to other knowledge work organisations, is perhaps the emphasis on the individual's 'imaginative' or creative skills which given the cultural and aesthetic nature and context of the final product are perhaps necessary. Yet in what follows I show how these ideologies of the individual are rather inconsistent with the everyday experiences of work. Admittedly, tensions between creativity and economic interest are somewhat unavoidable in creative organisations (Banks, 2007), but at Alpha the experiences shared by workers of their everyday lives show how some of these ideologies may be more likened to a kind of post-industrial window dressing that maintains ideals but in is rather distant from experiences.

### ***Remnants of the Factory***

With the promise of autonomy and decision making power, individuals are much more prone to see themselves as instrumental in shaping the conditions of their work and lives (Rose, 1989). Yet what I observed at Alpha was that this perceived agency diminished under certain conditions. In particular, economic tensions and demands on production – including nearing deadlines, was experienced as diminishing of the freedoms and agency of creative workers. This was particularly evident during the time I spent at Alpha – where production on the blockbuster project had moved into the later stages and tight control of the production processes became more imperative. Rather than the openly creative and explorative 'fun' space that the ideological discourses of the post-industrial era purport, experiences of work began to resemble aspects of the factories of yesteryear. The factory here is not necessarily a 'space with walls' but rather a more figurative idea about control, narrowing of work practices and the positioning of individuals as mere 'inputs' in the process of production rather than prized artists. The need to increase efficiency also reduces opportunities for making a unique contribution that is recognisable with the artist who created it thereby challenging the artistic ideal. While production demands put pressures on tighter control, it also became evident that some of these factory conditions were perhaps not exclusive to certain periods of project work but some were more or less consistent and reflected a view of workers as 'labour' who faced psycho-social pressures to produce, work long hours and accept lower wages.

### **Losing that family feeling**

At Alpha many of the idealised qualities of creative work were experienced by those working at Alpha in earlier days. Often work during that time would involve a smaller

team which was described as feeling “*like a family*”, “*cosy*”, and that everyone at the company was able to share a closeness by knowing each other’s personal story and background. Workers also felt that in those earlier days you had the ability to make an impression on the project, stating that “*you were able to jump between roles bit more and just putting yourself a bit more into the project and making it your own unique expression*”. Recently however, several individuals shared with me their experience of the studio beginning to change and that these ideals were no longer visible:

The company has grown a lot and quickly. When I started working with those guys on the game there were less than 30 people on the project. And the team has grown, so when I moved here I think we were about 50 or 60 on the project so we were still very small scale you could still know everyone and now we are 250 or something like that on the project, there are a lot of people at the studio that I don’t even know [...] I remember the studio head saying that he took pride in knowing the name of every single employee at the studio and not so long ago he admitted that it was not the case anymore. So that is one thing that has changed. I think it’s a little bit less cosy and personal than it was before.

*Adam, Game Designer*

For Adam, the growth the organisation was going through meant that it had started to lose the closeness he once felt in the smaller sized studio. Despite the expression of disappointment in his face and tone when he shared this with me - he was quick to defend this growth so as to not imply that it was becoming a “*game factory*” as in another studio owned by Grassroots in Vancouver where he had witnessed this happen:

So it’s not completely production driven as it is in Vancouver sometimes. Okay I’m giving you a bad picture of Vancouver now but to me Vancouver . . one aspect of what I don’t like in Vancouver is that I see it as a game factory . . you are seen as a resource amongst 2,000 other people and when a project needs someone then they’re going to take it from another project ‘we’re just going to take a scoop of developers and put them on another project’. it feels like you are just an ant in an ant farm and are not considered as a creative human being or entity or whatever.

*Adam, Game Designer*

Adam was able to circumvent feelings of working in a “*game factory*” like Vancouver where work was highly depersonalised and developers were treated like ‘ants’ and not

as creative human beings. Yet others seemed to recognise that things had changed at Alpha more significantly:

So I think there has been a lot of chances to be creative throughout the years but now we have entered production phase and that's where we have to grow up and learn how to not create any more and just do what we have set out to do.

*John, Games Artist*

In our subsequent conversation, John describes his team working mostly on creating “*lego-blocks*” where it is “*almost like you can imagine an IKEA factory*” where, he states, the lego blocks will later be distributed in different locales throughout the game. Others described extensive work on finding bugs in the game, which is a highly unimaginative and a rather monotonous scanning of the game for issues. This narrowing and specialisation of work tasks also reflects a certain formalisation of the work processes:

Because design on these kind of big projects we have right now with the blockbuster is a 400 or 500 people team [...] so the design process is almost formalised and strict. You have a whole design team a lot of people involved in the design [...] in this kind of project - for me it takes a lot of fun out of it. Because it's almost like an industry. It is an industry actually let's be honest about it . . it's a factory, we're a factory making games.

*Ray, Programmer*

Ray continues as he compares the work to a carmaker making a car for the “*mass-market*” having a lot of “*criteria they have to meet*” and not being able to “*have a crazy design person do what they want because the car wouldn't sell . . it's the same thing with our games*” again constructing a reality which is rather far from being consistent with the creative ideals he alluded to earlier. Instead he experienced that the game was becoming increasingly “*processified*”, meaning an increased division of labour and standardization of practices and tasks:

The word they use is to make it rational . . so instead of just having a team of talents that you trust . . they promote certain processes of making games which they call ‘rational level design’ and ‘rational game design’. And it sort of a tool set of best practices it's how we make the game development process more scientific and less talent based [...] [the games] almost all

look the same . . the more we use these kinds of things the more we become a factory and just make the same product . . and become the McDonald's of video games.

*Ray, Programmer*

While idolizing Picasso and Bob Dylan, Ray experiences work in Alpha in a way that is very removed from the work of the autonomous, unmanaged, and purely aesthetic work of the artist. Instead he describes the routinisation of work practices to a degree that he experiences that “*the fun is sort of sucked out of it*”. His experience of the organisation becoming the “*McDonald's of video games*” is also interesting, especially in reference to what George Ritzer (2015) calls the ‘McDonaldization of society’. Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis describes how a variety of areas of work and life are now increasingly becoming rationalised with an emphasis on predictability and control. This is almost an anti-thesis to the emphasis on the individual, revealing rather positioning the individual as a means to an end (i.e. as labour) treating them with only regards to their capacities to work and almost ignoring psycho-social conditions and requirements (Block, 1990). Cole, a game designer, discusses how he experiences his work as a very narrowed simplified task using the metaphor of an orchestra:

We’re like the cymbal player in the orchestra we’re just sitting and waiting, and then it’s like his cue and he’s oomph [makes cymbal sound] they say he’s the most stressed one in the whole symphony and he plays just one or two strokes in two hours or something . . so it’s kind of like that. When we get something we’re like ‘okay let’s do like this [makes sound] . . next!’. You know? And there is like no time to review it, it’s like a one-shot one kill thing.

*Cole, Game Designer*

Cole’s illustration above not only portrays the narrowing of his role in relation to the whole (playing only one or two strokes in a couple of hours) but also a sense of pressure and stress in delivering on this narrow task. Stress for delivering on deadlines was also emphasised by other workers in my interviews:

Sometimes everybody is stressed because you need to meet a deadline [...] But yeah most of the time it’s like a deadline and you just need to do this [...] then it starts making me angry and I’m like ‘oh these are all the things I would like to do’ and I know I can’t do them, and I don’t know how to put something creative into something that you just have a window with the checkbox or something.

*Alice, Games Artist*

Alice describes her work as a checkbox exercise. Despite the simplification of her work she feels the frustration of not being able to “*put something creative*” into her work which confounds with the stress and pressures to meet a deadline. All these experiences recounted here seem to signify distinct departure in the realities and experiences of the creative workers at Alpha from the aspirational and ideological discourses circulated throughout the organisation centred on the prized enterprising artist. In the next section I show how this disparity continues with the view of individuals as disposable labour that are overworked and under paid – once again presenting inconsistencies between ideologies and experiences.

### **Crunch time**

A well-documented feature of video game development is its requirement for people to work long hours around critical deadlines or project transition phases (Thompson et al., 2016). Such is the prominence of it in the industry that it is familiarly called the ‘crunch’ period by most industry insiders. It usually consists of game developers being called to work longer hours than contracted including into the nights and weekends. According to a survey conducted by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in 2014, crunch was a particularly common features of the industry as a whole comprising as much as 10 weeks per year on average (IGDA, 2014) with almost half of the respondents claiming that crunch is a pretty normal part of their jobs. The expectations to work long hours were also a common feature at Alpha. In its final stages, the blockbuster game required the investment of more hours than were available during the contracted 40 hour working week in order to complete the final touches before its deadline.

In a meeting, where I was observing several managers discussing different methods for organising crunch, the imperative to have workers do overtime became obvious. Several strategies were tossed around during the meeting about how to convince workers to do the overtime: “*overtime should be mandatory . . it should be mandatory in the weekend*” said one manager, “*what if we pay them one day and then they could stay over the night and work through the night?*” suggested another; “*we need to provide all their meals – every night we could offer them dinners so they don’t have to worry about food*” said a third. The discussion continued “*what does mandatory mean? We need to be clear about this, last time people were like “oh it’s mandatory, but I don’t need to go”*”; “*what if we come up with a list for whom it’s mandatory?*”,

*“we could make it like a waterfall so that overtime flows from one group to the next?”*, *“what we need to provide is candy and red bull . . and a hug”* said another manager as laughter sang out in the meeting room. Then some more humanistic concerns began to be raised *“there is a tension that builds up and people start to lose it at the end”* said one voice, *“we need to give people a chance to take it slow after the goals have been reached, maybe a few days taking it slow afterwards”*. While the meeting was adjourned on the topic with no plan forward set about how to manage overtime, the group were in consensus that overtime was essential in order to keeping the momentum of the project going.

Despite crunch being a dominant feature of game development, it appeared that working overtime persisted long before and long after designated crunch periods for many workers. People shared proudly with me their tendencies to work long hours – almost worn as a badge showing off their commitment to their work. This was evidenced in the talk of an interviewee who strangely confused which of the last few weekends it had been that he had something peculiar happen to him at the office, alluding to the fact that it could have been one of several he spent at the company *“but now last weekend . . I think it was last weekend . . or two weekends ago . . I was working in the weekend here”* – the weekends seemed to have blurred for him as it seemed he had spent several of them at Alpha. What was especially interesting in this case is that the interviewee dropped this piece of information into the narrative making it appear highly normal that he should work in the weekend with no attempts to explain to me what he was doing at the offices or why he had come in for the weekend. This normalising of working long hours was so prevalent that it can also be seen in the talk of those auxiliary to the game development process, for example Lara – from HR who has witnessed how these processes took effect:

It's really difficult to estimate how long things will take. So that's why everybody in the games industry always works too much and always has the feeling that [they are] too short on time. Of course I understand that every person in the team - every person that has their part to contribute they want this part to be excellent, so they never stop working with it.

*Lara, HR*

For Fisher, a producer on the game, it is the fault of the pre-production that leads to this necessity of crunch, which has become somewhat of an institution in game development:

The biggest failing is the failing that's been made all over the industry right now which is insufficient or ineffective preproduction which leads to heavy amounts of crunch in a project, and that crunch period becomes very stressful over time and wears down creativity. But if you asked a million game developers they would tell you the same thing.

*Fisher, Producer*

Tellingly, during my interview with Fisher we were interrupted by one of the administrators to ask him what he wanted to order for dinner that night. Fisher was particularly pleased at the care of being “*chased down*” or sought out in a meeting room to be questioned about his meal preferences. Yet while the company tried to provide a caring image towards those who might be under stress or working late it didn't seem to prevent the “*horrible*” and “*stressed*” feelings during crunch:

Yes I feel it. If I feel it . . I guess it's horrible up in the house. But yes everything comes down. You can feel it everywhere. Everybody is affected. And um . . well also my team - since we need to be here during weekends and we need to help out with breakfasts and food and stuff like that . . and I have people come and talk to me as well.

*Lara, HR*

A number of the interviewees talked about working under an immense pressure and feeling stressed during this time. This appeared to have an impact on their lives outside of work including family time. There was an expectation to work longer hours, as made clear by the meeting earlier and by the quotes above, and many of the workers tended to do so, working regularly on the weekends or late at night. This draws on similarities to Arlie Hochschild's (1997) study of Amerco, where she found that many workers sacrificed their home lives in favour of spending longer hours at work. Even the organisation's work-life balance program, and attempts at showing a caring attitude, wasn't sufficient to change this behaviour. Workers continued to work long hours due to organisational and financial pressures as well as fears about losing their jobs (Hochschild, 1997).

While no one expressed to me in my interviews any fears about losing their jobs, it was clear that security was important to them:

That's a huge part . . security . . if I decided to just do music and sound but there would be no one else to take care of the business side of things then I would choose something else because



I couldn't do that . . . freelance is just not . . . I couldn't do that and be creative. It would be too conflicting . . .

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

Workers were often employed under secure conditions of permanent employment (with a high level of employee protection in Sweden) so there was little risk that this security was going to suddenly change for workers at Alpha.

Financial security concerns, however, appeared to be a little more on people's radar. Several interviewees spoke about being able to earn "*twice as much money*" if they were to go work for a competitor or branch out on their own as a contractor. This was often rationalised away as being part of the job or by referring to earlier ideologies about being creative or working with quality. Cole, a game designer we met earlier, was rather more affected by the financial situation. For a long period of time during his employment at Alpha he worked a second job in the weekends, but due to growing pressures with the development at Alpha he was forced to quit his second job meaning a loss of a secondary income. When comparing his loss, he spoke of how he would earn more in eight days each month at his second job than he did working full-time the entire month at Alpha – putting a strain on his finances and forcing him to "*sort his shit out*". He spoke of this experience as "*very demotivating*" and stressful. Comparing these situations to that of other knowledge workers who are known to be paid well above average salaries (Alvesson, 2004) it is surprising that work conditions remain in favour of the profit margins of the organisation's owner rather than the prized and cherished individual creator.

## ***Summary***

What we can surmise here is that all is not as it is desired to be at Alpha. The everyday working conditions experienced by the workers at Alpha do not match the aspirations of the creative workers and the idealised discourses across the organisation. What I observed instead is a 'McDonaldization' of the work processes in the creative organisation, where ideologies promise a very different reality than the one experienced. The growth at the company coupled with the increasing need for efficiency and control leads to the narrowing and routinisation of work tasks, as well as pressures to work long hours for low pay. The aspirations of the creative organisation remain unfulfilled (at least in part – I will explain later) rather returning to remnants of an industrial and casting

doubts about whether game making lives up to the rose-tinted image of post-industrial knowledge work (Kline et al., 2003).

This also raises questions about how individuals experience or feel about these conditions of work. For example Costas and Kärreman (2016) found how he idealised conception and aspirations of the knowledge worker were rather contradictory to the everyday work experience of consultants and that this misalignment resulted in experiences of boredom and constructions of a bored self. These conditions likened to factory work also return us to the alienated worker. Blauner's book in 1964 titled *Alienation and Freedom* explores these experiences in the context of the factory worker. What becomes apparent in his writing is that such conditions of a narrowing of scope of work and an image of the individual as a powerless cog in a larger machine results in the alienation and self-estrangement of the worker from work. What this tells us is that in a situation of increasing pressures, overwork and underpay with growing distinctions between idealised work and everyday experiences - we would expect a great deal of expressions of dissatisfaction from the workers at Alpha and an increased rate of exit of the employee from the organisation. What I found was something bizarrely different. In the next chapter I unpack some of the emotions that people expressed about working at Alpha, and in particular one prevailing one.



## 6. For the Love of Work

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*You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a revolution against the culture*  
– Chuck Palahniuk

The narrator in Chuck Palahniuk's (1996) novel *Fight Club* hates his job. Throughout the novel he develops a growing disillusionment with corporate America, consumerism, and his existing way of life. He has checked out of his job at an insurance company, setting to playing solitaire on his computer to fill his work days. While he hates his job, he does not quit and this prolonged engagement with his co-workers and patriarchal boss drive him to an estrangement from his existence that leads to rebellion, violence and self-destruction in the hopes of escape. The troubled protagonist in the novel is an example of the experiences of powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement of Blauner's (1964) factory worker, yet he does not work in a factory, he finds himself in 90s corporate America. Today, we find these kinds of 'dead men' living the prolonged death that is work in all kinds of jobs and workplaces (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). These 'strong feelings of self-alienation' (p. 28) are a growing part of the discourses on contemporary work and labour (cf. Costas and Fleming, 2009; Costas and Kärreman, 2016) and it calls upon us to account for more of the experiences of working in modern society.

As we saw in the last chapter video game development work can often unglamorous labour that does not live up to the autonomous and creative ideals that the organisation and its workers aspire to. What we expect to see in these cases are experiences and expressions of this estrangement and distancing from work, perhaps feelings of discontent with the existing order of things and some ideas of exit. While at least one interviewee spoke to me about plans to leave the organisation in favour of a smaller studio and one other described their experience of working at Alpha as being "exhausting", like "having a knot in your chest", and becoming "detached emotionally", the vast majority of those I spoke with expressed rather contradictory views. There was an overwhelming expression of love, a love for work. This rather puzzling discovery drew me to questioning further – not only: (1) why do workers express love for their

work despite less than ideal conditions of work? But also: (2) what was motivating this love? And (3) how can we interpret it and make sense of it? In this chapter I intend to unravel these expressions of love and delve deeper into the meanings of love for work. I start by looking at some of the expressions of love shared with me during my conversations and continue the exploration of loving work by going through several possibilities for how this phenomenon can be interpreted. I end this chapter with a section that explores the relationship between work, love, and self as a final link between several of the interpretations and what I theorise as the main reasoning explaining the love for work expressed at Alpha.

### ***Loving Work***

In a world where work is an alienating force and where workers feel that work has little value, and is tedious, savage, and interim (Anthony, 1977), and where work and work conditions are regulated and workers are expected to work long hours (as in Alpha during crunch) how can we explain exclamations and experiences of love, happiness, joy, engagement and satisfaction with work? Many of the interviewees expressed to me a love for their work (often with a lit expression and a glimmer in the eye as they spoke about the object of their affection). They talked about how game design had been their dream job, even before they had known if it was feasible vocation:

I think the game designer's job is . . it's my dream job . . that has been my dream job forever.  
I love it.

*Adam, Game Designer*

[Talking about his work] It's a lot about psychology and an understanding of how people react to different stimuli basically and telling a story which is also something I really love doing [...] And you use so many tools and techniques and no two areas are exactly the same - which makes me very happy.

*Layton, Game Designer*

Others spoke of what they did as a need, something that they needed and loved in their lives:

I think it's something I *need*. I think you learn that there are some things that give you joy. Like some people have joy by doing bank stuff, for other people it's running or just climbing

things. For me this is something that makes me very happy. It's one of the things I love the most.

*Eric, Level Designer*

I'm very emotional, when I focus on something I focus on it 100%. I can't do something half heartedly [...] I have to love what I do or I won't do it properly. And I hate doing things not properly. It's the worst thing I know.

*Isaac, Level Designer*

This “*need*” they expressed even shaped many of their choices leading up to their positions at Alpha. Bill, a producer on the game spoke of how he decided to become a game developer because of his love for working with computers:

So when it came time to . . when you had to pick your universities, your class programme, obviously I was in the class programme looking through courses that everyone was offering . . I fell in love with computing. I love working with computers, hardware, softwares, so I thought 'right that's the direction I want to work, with computers, on computers, whatever'.

*Bill, Producer*

Others, like Kyle, drew comparisons to alternatives – about his previous experience at working elsewhere other than Alpha and how he finally found the satisfaction he desired in his current work:

No I wouldn't be satisfied. And I know that from experience - that quality assurance job I had it was just a job - punch in and punch out. But I wanted to be creative, yeah then it's just a job, it's not like you look forward to going there actually [...] And I used to be one of those people that would be standing at the bus station or the train station and would be 'oh its Monday' and now I'm one of the people that stand there and go 'YES! It's Monday!'

*Kyle, Programmer*

Although such comments were made by a large number of those I spoke to, it was clear that not everyone in the organisation was privy to the same experiences or motivations. Jimmy, a member of the marketing team, spoke as an outsider to the creative group of workers but made an important observation about their differences:

Me, I come from business and since I came here it's been a cultural shock between business - you know money buzz - and production where it's art. Those people are not here to make

money - let's be clear. All those people working here are artists, all of them from the guy who codes to the art guy. So you know I would expect that everyone tells you like me 'oh I am very creative' but even more for those people because they are artists. But because they are artists it also means that there is something else that triggers the passion and motivation.

*Jimmy, Marketing*

According to Jimmy, there was something other than money motivating this passion for their work. As discussed in the previous chapter, fantasies of the artist are also constructed around agency - thereby positioning those who are able to be artists with a lot of freedoms and luxuries comparative to other workers. Yet Bill's love for computing and Isaac's desire for doing things properly are not directly explained by a comparison to others. As such these expressions love require further exploration and contextualisation. One way to contextualise these expressions is to attempt to understand the organisation's relation to the emotion of love.

Frank, a producer responsible for the recruitment of many new members perhaps indicates the organisation's part in employing those who have the capacity to love their work:

I mean it's important to us that they are so in love with what they do that [...] most of the guys we ask them 'what do you do in your spare time?' and if the answer isn't 'oh I love games I play games . . I wrote this mini game for the apple . . for the apple iOS' . . if they say 'no' to that then we kinda go - 'okay so you don't play games in your spare time? You don't programme in your spare time? You're not interested in art outside of work?' 'Okay well maybe we're not an employer for you'.

*Frank, Producer*

Frank asserts that the employment of those who have a love for art or games outside of work or programme in their spare time, means that that love may directly spill over into their time at work, which Frank saw as important.

While Frank shows that aspects of love were encouraged in the organisation - it became apparent that the love for work that the individuals experienced was a fleeting phenomenon and not a permanent or lasting one. This love came and went in moments, even within the account of the same individual. Moments of love were punctuated with different feelings and attitudes towards work - indicating a temporal dimension to love for one's work, where love is a temporary state rather than an enduring one. Gary reflected how the love he had when he began at the organisation had sobered over time:

Well the first one and a half years you were pretty much starstruck and in love with the company . . but then you start to realise it's just like any other company, it has its ups and downs.

*Gary, Level Designer*

Despite these “*ups and downs*” that he recognizes, it was possible for Gary to re-instate his love for his work, through his comparison of how much worse off others were in their relationships to their work:

*Gary:* I know a lot of people who just take a job to get paid and they feel miserable that they need to start drinking or they need to travel several times a year just to be able to cope with their everyday life.

*Iva:* *But you feel your situation is different to that?*

*Gary:* Yeah sometimes it doesn't actually feel like you're working it just feels like you're at the fraternity house and playing around with all your friends.

In our conversation Gary was quick to position himself as more fortunate than others. He does this by pointing out that he was able to do something that he loved while others were just able to “*cope*”. As we continued talking he re-emphasised to me just how much joy he got out of his work - which gave him a “*kick*” and a “*rush*” as he explained. Gary's remarks show two dimensions to a love for one's work. One that aggrandises working at Alpha, and the other that subdues these feelings by acknowledging love's limitations. Noticeably, individuals who expressed to me their love for work seemed to move somewhat between these states, at times reflexively bringing down the level of love and often re-constructing it again within the same conversation. Yet a lot remained unclear about the explanation for such experiences or states of love in my initial encounters with them and this encouraged me to question and position these articulations of love against broader social dimensions of their construction. In the rest of this section I intend to explore several possible interpretations of why the individuals experience and express a love for their work at Alpha.

### **The ethics of love**

A state in which one loves one's work can emanate from a position where work and its pursuit is seen as connected to some desired good. The idea that work can be ethical and



morally good as well as leading to love takes us back to Weber's ([1930], 2001) review of the protestant's beliefs that hard work will lead to salvation. While this view has softened in modern contemporary work the idea that hard work leads to success prevails (Jackall, 1988). One's dedication and commitment to one's work offers a way of rationalizing and constructing the self as a moral and ethical worker. The 'exemplary worker' (Ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003) or the 'organization man' (Whyte, 1956) strive to achieve the shared values of hard work and continued commitment to the work, doing so is the means through which one can be in a state of righteousness and love.

At Alpha working hard was emphasised and incorporated as part of being a good organisational citizen. In weekly company meetings I often heard groups and individuals being singled out and thanked for their hard work and dedication to the organisation and their specific projects. Hard work was also emphasised through the expectations constructed in the organisation of working long hours. In the previous chapter we saw that the ethic of working hard was reinforced by the discourse of those senior managers planning crunch and calling upon people to be at work late into the night and weekends. For Gordon this value became expressed as a need which he felt was natural:

But then of course I sometimes need to work very hard . . . ugh . . . like being creative and working super super hard.

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Others also constructed their satisfaction with their work and themselves as part of living and fulfilling the ethic of hard work. For example, Cole, who we met in the previous chapter, who had worked two jobs. He stated with pride "*I've always been a hard worker and a lot of the times I've had two jobs. I've had an extra job besides this since I started. I started my first summer job when I was 15-16*". In our talk he repeatedly constructed himself as hard worker stating "*I guess I've always had that hard working mentality*" – even frowning upon others who did not share in his values:

So that means a lot of weekend work and nights and when I sleep I constantly think about work and take the time to see how we can shortcut it and still not fail [...] like the closest friends I have here at work we share the same mentality and experience and we know what it means when we've shipped more games. At the same time, you see we are struggling [...] and you see other people kind of like chilling out and not really knowing or not really doing what they're supposed to do [...] If you don't see all the people do it then you're like 'why am I

trying to be super creative here and solve all these issues whereas some people leave at 4:30pm and just don't care?'. Those people . . some of them being in high positions and that's also . . that can be a stake in the wheel so to speak.

*Cole, Game Designer*

Cole expresses a disappointment towards others who do not share the same mentality, or attitude to working as him. In extra parts of this narrative he initially refers this lack of work ethic to the junior staff and blames it on inexperience, however in the later part of the narrative we see that he also feels that those in higher positions are also not sharing his values - which he feels demotivated by. In later parts of our interview he is able to reconstruct his love for his work calling it a “*multifaceted kind of soup of awesome*”.

Another clear case of the investment in the ideologies of hard work is Fisher. Fisher is a newly appointed producer on the game. In his narratives of his self-journey he recalls how he worked his way up “*right from the bottom of the industry*” to where he is now. His motivation to do something that inspired him, and after failed deviances into the financial world and politics he turned to something that was a hobby of his since before he could even talk. At first he developed games for free and that got him some attention as well as a first job as a game tester at another company. In the process of self-training he recounted how he had to make do with limited resources, teaching himself to use the game design tools of the industry:

There weren't many resources like formal resources but there were a lot of informal resources and communities on the web and tools to download and just play with [...] so I just systematically worked through all the tools until I could just do that with all of them. And it wasn't until . . I kind of overkilled it a bit really because I didn't allow myself to start applying until I was able to produce stuff that could compete in the industry. Which in hindsight was a bit of a regret of mine because when I got here I was like 'Oh they don't actually do this on their own?' It's like 10 people do what I was kind of at that point doing in my role I didn't understand it at the time because I was doing the art, audio, animation, particle effects and level design.

*Fisher, Producer*

In this narrative Fisher works hard at developing his skills to a state that he acknowledges, looking back, may have even been excessive. He forgoes pay and employment during this process purely for the dedication of achieving his dream of getting into the industry and for the ability to do what inspires him. He accepts a job

which requires lesser skills than he has developed in order to get his “*foot in*” as he states, and get a chance to work his way up. All these sacrifices and investments are however not in vain, from his perspective, as he is able to fulfil his desires and do what he loves – as I encountered when I probed further into some of his justifications for all his hard work:

*Fisher:* I love it but I work really really hard. Harder than I should actually . . which is really interesting. There's a lot I constantly think about cause I do probably do the most hours . . I mean I'm not sure . . I'm probably one of two . . but I'm certainly up there definitely in the top percent of that anyway.

*Iva:* *But you don't think that's also down to the individual . . because surely if I really wanted to I would also work 70-80 hour weeks or something like that, you know if I want to, but then I could also say 'okay that's enough, I think I've done enough'*

*Fisher:* Yeah it is absolutely up to the individual. I just don't think it's the most effective way to be that's all. That's the game we're in. That's what I'm about. I'm so far from it. But I guess I'm more acutely aware than many people of how far from it I am.

*Iva:* *How important is your work to you in that case?*

*Fisher:* Oh I live for this. I live for . . the rest of . . I mean I have a lot of joy in my life - in fact my life outside of work is wonderful. I have a great life but the reason I do everything in my life is to do this well - just because I organised my life that way.

In this excerpt from our conversation, Fisher takes pride in being in the top percent of people who do the most hours. This and his earlier recollections of working his way up the organisation confirm his beliefs in himself as being a hard worker. He rationalises his love for work as connected to his work ethic of being dedicated to his work by working the most hours. This connects the ideal state of being a virtuous and ethical worker, even exemplary worker, with a feeling of love for one's self and for work. However, love was once again a temporal thing and not an enduring love. Fisher shared with me later that it was a “*daily struggle*” to be creative and he felt pressured and stressed around deadlines that gave him a sense of “*panic or at least fear*”. This once again confirms a rather momentary experience of love, indicating that perhaps love is consequential to the social conditions that workers encounter.

## **Love is blind**

Basking in the glory of love may blind individuals from experiencing other feelings such as disappointment or resentment in their current situation. For example, feeling a love for certain experiences of work may distract workers from less than ideal moments or qualities - like low pay or periods of mundane work. It may be the case that interviewees chose to express feelings of love in order to avoid addressing other conflicting feelings. So here rather than love as a motivation for the pursuit of work in itself it becomes a means through which individuals who struggled with other aspects of work are able to justify a continued dedication to it, and why they do not exit the organisation in the face of the experience of challenges. Moments of love can therefore help blind individuals to other direr states and provided them with a way to cope. For Alice, the games artist, she recalled her start in the industry when she worked long hours on the tedious and repetitive task of quality control and bug spotting:

There were times when I had to work Monday to Sunday and you had one day off and it was a lot of overtime. It was kind of funny because they split you up into different teams and you had to look at different types of areas so they put in the art team and they were like ‘oh she’s the creative one so she can go into . . .’ (laughs). It wasn’t fun because you pretty much play the game and you see a bug you record it and you can’t really do anything else. I guess maybe for a while for me personally I would think of creative ways to play the game so I’m not always doing the same thing and I would be like ‘hey let’s do competitions’ so we could look at who ends up getting most goals so I can get out of that ‘oh my job is so boring’. but after that I completely got burnt out I was like ‘why am I here?’ . . . ‘I don’t want to do this. This is not the career that I want. I wanted to get into game design . . . this is not the position’. And I couldn’t stand it. I mean even for a normal person you couldn’t do that for very long.

*Alice, Games Artist*

In this narrative, Alice recalls a time when she wasn’t so in love with her work. Alice describes her attempts to deal with the mundaneness by instilling fun and games into the processes of work. While these attempts proved futile as she eventually burnt out she never left the games industry. Instead she shared with me how her love of producing games was reinstated when she joined another company, this time as working more directly with designing games. The company’s environment, which she described as “*the funniest and silliest place*” filled with creative people who were fun but also crazy, allowed her to return a level of joy to her work forgetting and forgiving earlier experiences of the mundane and tedious work.

This experience of overlooking certain experiences of work is echoed by Marcus who describes his current job as a producer as “*basically like an HR manager*” whose tasks are to “*talk and make people feel well and try to calm them*” which he acknowledges as not a very exciting task in his job. Instead of dwelling on the tediousness of his current tasks he instead focused his energies in our interview on repeatedly emphasising to me his love of the visual and “*image related things*”. His focus on the object of his love even extended to him constructing a sophisticated metaphor where programming is about fulfilling a vision of the artist, and debugging (a routine task) becomes the finishing of a sculpture:

So it's more like the finishing touches that you're making it look polished. If you liken it to a sculpture you might do the outline of the thing and in the end you're doing all of the little details and so on. And it takes skill but you've already done the big picture . . so these things are . . you could stop at pretty much any one point and you'd still have a nice sculpture but it kind of depends on how far you're prepared to . . how polished it's going to be. So that's what keeps you going.

*Marcus, Producer*

Turning the mundane into art is love's work. But love helps not only to cope with that which individuals recognise as tedious but also blinds them to the object of our love's flaws and drawbacks. As Bauman (2001) points out - love means ‘signing a blank cheque’ (p. 168). Such immersion into the object of love can lead to carelessness and may prevent us from seeing the consequences of love in a clear light. To love work can make people blind to alternatives, to life outside of work and to disengagement from work. This is well reflected in Ray's narrative. Ray describes himself as a programmer at Alpha who is more technically focused. Yet five years into his work at Alpha he got inspired by a project that Grassroots was about to release overseas:

So I started a hobby project at home where I started some prototypes of game design ideas and I got really a bit obsessed with that and I really didn't give up with that I continued that as a hobby project and after a while I showed it to the Managing Director and he liked it a lot so he was really encouraging so that continued [...] it was really a dream project it was really fun and rewarding.

*Ray, Programmer*

Ray's work on his dream project continued in his own time over a period of two years – working afterhours, weekends all while toiling away at his pet project. Eventually Grassroots gave approval to Ray and the studio to gather a small team and develop his project into a full game. At no point elsewhere during our conversation did Ray light up than when reflecting of this particular project.

And we made the game in seven months or something and there was no summer vacation or nothing. And it was really fun and rewarding and amazing to have the chance to have something you built as a sort of prototype at home and make it for real and all these little ideas that you had prototyped . . Having them realised by professional artists and making them really beautiful and making good music . . it was fantastic experience really.

*Ray, Programmer*

Ray's fantastic experience came at the cost to his own time. His only repayment for his work was the joy of seeing his project produced in its final stage and the “*dopamine*” and excitement he felt as a result.

Like ‘oh my god I created this I wrote this story’ and it was a really good feeling in my stomach and I always felt like that . . being creative is when it goes well it's almost like a drug . . you get some kind of dopamine . . whatever the good chemical is in your body . . it's a really fantastic feeling.

*Ray, Programmer*

Love for one's work can blind from the harsh reality or consequences of the work. In the case of Ray his time and commitment was repaid by the realisation of his dream project. Yet it was the organisation and the owner who financially benefitted from his love for his work. He made numerous sacrifices for his love. He talked also about his hopes of working in such a way again after sharing with me his disenchantment with “*programming most of the day*” in the “*McDonald's of video games*”. Love works to hide, conceal, or cover up that which we do not want to see. Once again it aids in workers' relentless momentum towards their goals, and when successful in achieving those goals rewarding them with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction – although somewhat seemingly illusory.

### **A love devoid of reason**

At times the workers expressed another kind of love for their work, one that seemed devoid of rationale or meaning other than for the pleasure of producing. A sort of hedonism of production that gives way to any reason. Bauman (2001) argues that love and reason speak different languages – love is devoid of all objectives and attempts at mastery or control. Such love inspires the self to forge with the unknown and senseless and forgo any meaningful constructions. The experiencing of love in itself is seen as sufficient to drive activity. This leaves us with the pleasure seeking behaviour and the love of a process in which the self becomes submerged and decentred. For the game designers it was the processes of creating which saw them express such feelings of love. It was about getting lost, narrowing their focus and eliminating all demands other than to be “*in the moment*”. For Eddie, the sound engineer we met earlier, this experience was so potent that breathing became an encumbrance:

Creativity is . . well not the only thing . . but almost the only thing that can make me forget to breathe . . that is just all of a sudden (gasps) because you’re so focused . .

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

The means for living go amiss when Eddie is in the crux of love for his work. By this reasoning, workers’ selves become lost or collapsed into what they are doing so that selves and everything else evades consciousness. This idea can be explained in Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ which he describes as the ‘subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself’ (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamedh, and Nakamura, 2005, p. 601). Eddie describes this experience when creating music:

Music is always been like that for me I go around you know like a dog trying to push a pillow or something and drag it down and then go up and drag it down again. And you’re like yeah that’s ‘just right’ and you go into the bubble for weeks.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

This subjective experience of being in “*the bubble*” becomes so fixing that the drive to conduct and return to such activity comes from the experience of the activity itself to the extent that individuals ‘were willing to go to great lengths to experience it again’ (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005, p. 601), thus giving way to rhyme or reason. Staying in

the enjoyable experience of flow requires that one must focus their attention on the activity and reduce other attention demanding sources in order to orientate around the flow activity. For Eddie, this involved building what he called his “*nest*”. His nest was a room on the third floor of the Alpha building in which he had arranged all his instruments and equipment perfectly. He was about to step into this “*bubble*” for weeks so he made sure that everything he needed was there and all else, that could possibly detract his attention, was removed from his time in the nest.

Knowing that the phone won’t ring . . . that the door . . . just being. And releasing everything all the worries and emails . . . bills and everything and all of a sudden . . . concentration. Basically like focus and just do and let everything else go . . . that’s probably tying back to creating my space, my nest you know the womb. I just need the space . . . no one can touch it . . . I think that’s important for me at least.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

Gordon also spoke of removing all possible distractions and getting into that “*zone*” and the pressures he felt of getting into and remaining in the process of “*flow*”.

I need to remove all people and sound . . . like all people that I could relate to. So it could be in a coffee shop like drinking coffee where I don’t know anyone and I’m listening a little bit to music and I write a script for instance. I could do that. But I couldn’t do that here at Alpha when people that I could relate to . . . like that I could say hi to . . . so and then I need to be super focused and then I think my job is hard because then I really need to like dive into that bubble and find you know . . . people talk about ‘the zone’ or like a ‘flow’.

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Marcus also recognised himself and others getting into the process of ‘*flow*’ where time seems to disappear:

So once I start with something it’s pretty easy for me not to notice that two hours have passed and I haven’t actually gotten up from my seat at all. Especially with game developers . . . I mean there’s stories where game developers can sit for like three days and drink just energy drinks. So it’s fairly easy to get into the zone and create something.

*Marcus, Producer*

Based on Marcus’ observation of others above and further supported by its repeated description in my discussions with those working at Alpha it became pretty clear that



what can be interpreted as ‘flow’ was a common experience for workers. This is not entirely surprising given that flow is described as a creative process fuelled by the intrinsic motivation and reward which came from being in the experience itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Having such experiences as part of one’s understanding of work can be a source for the feelings of love towards work. Love without reason, which Bauman describes, can be considered synonymous with the enjoyment of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 1982) and thus the engagement in flow is rewarded by the experience itself.

Where flow was described by one interviewee as “*lovely like a good conversation that’s going nowhere and you’re just enjoying that*” the permanence of such activity and the ability to enter ‘flow’ experiences can be affected by the conditions of one’s work. The struggle to enter flow, as Gordon experienced, is one that may be difficult or easy depending on conditions for the individual. Flow therefore, may be unsustainable as an ongoing state and once again alludes to a temporality in the feelings of love. Additionally, the argument that love from flow is free from reason is questionable. Flow is not free from the social - requiring circumstances and conditions to align in order for one to be able to enter and experience flow. Therefore, the experience of flow is actually never removed from the social context despite its seeming ability to decentre or blur our attention from reasonable and necessary things (such as the necessity to breathe). Therefore, love as flow may simply delay our reflexivity until the moments preceding or following it. We need to be reflexive in order to make sense of the fact that we have been in flow and that this experience has been rewarding. So the social context in which one experiences these feelings is very key to the engagement with such experiences. So that the social never disappears entirely but is merely blurred for a period in which it may escape consciousness. So love is never removed from reason bar for in moments. Bauman (2001) also agrees with this as he finally concludes that while love is an escape from ethical worries, but it is not good for understanding *how to go on* - so that love ultimately needs reason. In order to maintain the entering of states of love without reason (flow) we ultimately need reason to make sense of them and a state of love can never be eternal for if it were, all meanings and values of love would be lost. Therefore, the experience of flow itself is not enough to justify love – there is something more that connects the feelings of love and the resulting meanings constructed.

## *Love Thy Self*

To say that love is devoid of meaning would be contrary to what was found in the narratives of those at Alpha. In all three interpretations above love was connected to reaching a desired state which was made sense of through attaining one's desired goals or intentions and therefore engaging the self in the process. For the ethical worker it is fulfilment of a desired self rendered by the personal values of being 'hard working' and constructing this self through this hard work. For those blinded by love, love is the concealment of unattractive realities, allowing one's self to remain basking in love rather than facing or dealing more directly with these realities. For the lovers in flow, love and happiness are found by producing in ways that give themselves personal meaning and value, which they construct in subsequent moments of reflection. In each of these ways, feelings of love are the by-products of selves reaching desired states or avoiding undesirable ones.

In almost all of these cases, the fantasy of the self-becoming an idealised and desired self is a recurring theme in the talk of those loving work. The dream job (Adam) of the powerful creator (Layton) who gets to work with the tools he loves and creates something others will love is what drives their passion and motivation. Almost all of the narratives in this chapter so far can be connected to the aligning of the self to an ideal – one that can be connected to the fantasies of the artist encountered in the previous chapter. Alice and Marcus' denial of the ordinary and mundane in preference for the creative, artistic and fun work of the artist or sculptor give meaning to their mostly mundane work. Fisher's dedication and hard work is not only part of his ethic around work but also what he believes will lead him to salvation or in this case recognised as the creative artist he desires to be:

I mean my dream role . . . there's a guy in Grassroots whose job it is to be responsible for the creative output of everything inside Grassroots so that's where I want to be. Not necessarily inside there but in that kind of a job. A place where I can pull strings [...] And I don't expect to get there anytime soon so part of my job in the short term is to be very very successful at the studio level [...] Right now I'm in the thick of that so it's more like . . . I'm in . . . I'm digging a tunnel right now and I'm just about to pop out the other side but I'm deep deep down inside the tunnel right now.

*Fisher, Producer*

To Fisher, becoming the instrumental and successful artist he desires to be is a process. The metaphor of the tunnel reflects both his journey to this desired state as something he has to work through (again reinforcing his work ethic) and a way to describe where he currently is – “*deep deep down*” - in reaching his goal. His vision is to “*pop out the other side*” and be able to work with his dream role and be successful in attaining his status as recognised and powerful artist responsible for all creative output within the larger owner company. This project of the self, in Giddens’ (1991) terms, is also a driving force for Adam, a senior game designer. In the narrative that follows, Adam desires to be able to recognise himself through his work. He also desires ownership of his work, which was a motivation for him to move from an advisor role with Grassroots to a game designer working more directly within the current game project:

I had been involved in a lot of projects with no real deep involvement in one feature or no part of a game that I could own myself, which was a bit frustrating because coming up with ideas for other people and seeing them pick and choose and reject or accept your ideas . . . it’s nice I mean they are happy about it and usually really appreciate it. But then you really want to have something that is your own thing so I also wanted to go into production for that [...] I guess I want the ownership, I want to feel that I can say I did that, that’s my thing. Of course I’m proud of the game as a whole but we are so many people on that game [...] But yeah to me it’s important to get recognition from my peers and the users - that’s my main motivation and driver.

*Adam, Game Designer*

His desire for deep involvement and the kind of work that allows him to recognise himself, as well as being recognised by others (peers and users), is a real motivator for Adam. Adam’s longing for deep involvement and ownership, renders a fantasy that work (going into production) can be a way to fulfil these desires. Driver (2017) notes that such fantasies of an imaginary or desired self can be powerful motivators as well as sources of meaning and love in work. In the case at Alpha, individuals experience their selves as invested or entangled with the creative work they carry out and its products:

I guess being creative is a bit intimate in that sense . . . it’s very much you you’re putting yourself out there . . . like it’s part of my personality and I’m expressing myself when it comes to music or art or writing something.

*Arthur, Games Artist*

Putting yourself out there in the intimate process and being able to recognise the self as contributing to something greater which can be recognised by others is rewarding. For Gary this process is a source of “*rush*” or happiness when he feels he has invested himself to reach a desired state of contributing to something greater:

But when you actually get those ideas you get such a rush that I don't think I would be able to do something where I couldn't use my imagination. I need to feel that I am actually contributing to something greater without actually doing something that someone else told me to. If you know what I mean, so I feel that it's actually something that *me*, who I am as a person, managed to figure out on my own and developed something that can be used for other things.

*Gary, Level Designer*

Yet Gary's rush reminds us once again of the fleeting nature of this happiness. As his narrative implies in the first sentence, Gary experiences moments when he is actually able to feel he has reached the state he desires by using his imaginative skill and unique self to contribute to that which is desired. His narrative also implies that there may be moments when this is not the case, emphasising the transient nature of this love. While never reaching the desired state fully its pursuit becomes an ongoing project, as Ray explains:

I make music in my spare time at home and since that's like a hobby thing I end up with like maybe three songs a year perhaps which I am happy with. Because that's the other side of creativity sometimes. You struggle with something you try to come up with a song or a game idea or something. You try it and you spend a couple of nights with it and if it doesn't turn out well you're not really happy with it and if it doesn't take off . . it's a bit depressing . . your sense of self worth . . 'oh maybe I'm not that good after all'. But then when you actually make something that you're really happy with a song or whatever - it's like you're walking on clouds for days it's a wonderful feeling.

*Ray, Programmer*

The narrative above shows how Ray's work is tied to his sense of self-worth. His experiences of walking on clouds for days, but also feeling a bit depressed result from constructing a self directly in and through his work - and either succeeding to make something that he's happy with or struggling with it. This struggle to reach a state of love with his work is an ongoing process in the relation of self, work and emotions. In

this way love comes from succeeding with work that the self is tightly coupled to, leading to self-worth and other positive constructions of the self – including fulfilment of desired selves. However, while these successful states may be attainable they are merely temporal and fleeting, resulting in the ongoing struggle to achieve or sustain them.

## ***Summary***

Exploring the different possibilities for love for work shows how each different interpretation can be understood as part of the entangled of the self in the meanings and expressions of love in the pursuit of a desired state. Reaching the desired state may account for feelings of love, but remains problematic for the self since its constructions are mostly temporal and therefore fleeting. This demands the exploration of feelings in relation to their social and cultural contexts as emotions are largely situated in and influenced by social factors (Hochschild, 2003). In order to make sense of this relation further it is important to look closer at how these constructs are structured as well as the consequences that result from these.

One area to look at the self's relation to the desired state or aspiration and how the context of creative work can provide a special space for this relation to develop. In unravelling the processes of this relation it is important to not only explore the different desired states and undesired states as positions but also at how individuals take to the process of constructing themselves in relation to these. In this regard, the next chapter takes some inspiration from Bourdieu's writing in the area of cultural production. Bourdieu's work is relevant here for four reasons that help further the analysis of what is happening at Alpha – (1) the recognition that the production of cultural works is a special field that is different (but not unrelated) to other forms of production; (2) the importance in including the individual in the study of cultural work and recognising their agentic capacities; (3) the need to explore both positions available in a field of cultural production but also the processes of position-takings by individuals; and lastly (4) the exploration of this interaction as an ongoing struggle that sees neither permanent winners nor losers but rather an interaction between a number of tensions that results in fluctuations between differing states or positions in the field (Bourdieu, 1993). Using these understandings, I explore how love persists at Alpha despite conditions that challenge its construction, and how this plays out in the game of cultural production that the self is engaged in.

## 7. The Game with the Self

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*Ever get the feeling you're playing some vast and useless game whose goal you don't know and whose rules you can't remember? Ever get the fierce desire to quit, to resign, to forfeit, only to discover there's no umpire, no referee, no regulator to whom you can announce your capitulation? Ever get the vague dread that while you have no choice but to play the game, you can't win it, can't know the score, or who keeps it? Ever suspect that you don't even know who your real opponent might be? – McKenzie Wark*

Welcome to the game. In his book *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark (2007) introduces us to 'gamespace', a place where the logics of video gameplay apply to the experiences in everyday life. In his book, Wark proposes that we are each involved in multiple games - with each having an image as the prize that motivates us to play its specific game. Applying this metaphor to make sense of work, selves, and emotions I encountered at Alpha, this chapter will argue how the game at Alpha is on predominantly draws on the self. This game, if won, fulfils the idealised and desired identity of the player as well delivers feelings of love and validations of the self through work. Continuing in this metaphor of a game, I consider the structural dimension of playing the Game with the Self (the Game). More specifically here, the work of Bourdieu in the field of cultural production will guide some of the analysis and the development of the theories around the Game. In particular, the main aspect of the Game, that I introduce here, is similar to Bourdieu's conception of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) where the work of cultural producers relies not on objective ways to value work but predominantly on subjective and politically contested means. As such, creative work becomes a 'site of struggles', which continuously produces and re-produces its winners and losers, albeit in differing moments, that successively reshapes a field of cultural production and its positions (Bourdieu, 1993).

Through the metaphor of the game, I work to develop the discussion on the self's role in navigating creative work. I set out to show how through (1) aspirations, (2) signatures, and (3) platforms, the self is brought into creative work at Alpha, allowing creative workers to develop their love and thereby also rendering work meaningful. I also use the metaphor of a game to show the individuals working at Alpha are players who engage in these processes due to a desire to 'win' and thereby fulfilling their aspirations. However, since the specific rules about how to win are fluid and situationally determined rather than fixed and clear, it quickly becomes evident that

playing the Game is an ambiguous endeavour and players' status of winners and losers does not remain fixed but varies, producing a variety of feelings and consequences. Some of these consequences call upon considerable emotion work and painful experiences when workers do not succeed in being affirmed in their desired and aspired to identities. I then go on to suggest that workers attempt to cope with these outcomes by shifting the target aspirational identity from that of the artist to that of the craftsman. This shift allows workers to amend their image of the idealised creative worker while also reducing the risks and experiences of challenging emotions resulting from playing the Game to be the heroic artist figure. Ultimately, I argue, the Game sustains itself with this shift in positions and allows for the escape from some (but not all) of its outcomes.

### ***How to Play***

Applying the metaphor of a game to the organisation of creative work at Alpha enables us to make sense of the social conditions and relations involved in the processes and experiences of creative work. Players (workers) are active in playing the game and while the rules may not be clear, what is evident is that stakes for winning are enough to draw players into the Game. The Game is also uncertain, and based on unequal relations which favour different players in different moments – so that their positions cannot be maintained or sustained for any indefinite period of time but are repeatedly contested. In his classification of games Caillois (1961) describes this kind of gameplay as part of *Agôn*, a game that is competitive and the point of which is for 'each player to have his superiority in a given area recognised' (p. 15). While his description for competition over elite positions is appropriate for the Game, *Agôn* does not equate to all elements of the Game. While basic criteria in order to be able to play are identifiable, the 'fixed limits' of *Agôn* are not. Neither are the 'rules applied equally to all', nor is the victor's superiority beyond dispute (Caillois, 1961, p. 15). Instead players enter the game navigating the requirements with each turn, not knowing if they will reach any clear or desired states. Rather, in the Game at Alpha, what become identifiable are the minima of play. In particular, there are three basic minima of gameplay that can be distinguished and therefore theorised as structural dimensions of the Game – (1) an aspirational identity for the self – as motivator, (2) the self-signature – as imprint of the self on work, and (3) the interaction of these on a platform – a space for work (and self) to be affirmed by its audience.

### **Aspirations for the self**

Individuals aspire to affirm selves as preferred or desired identities. Individuals work to be affirmed in a ‘condition that they consider to be higher, better or nobler than the one they currently occupy’ (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009, p. 356). These aspirational identities are a source of motivation that drives individuals’ behaviours and attitudes to work (Driver, 2017). In organisations, aspirational identities are usually sanctioned by the organisation in a way that attempts to realise both organisational interests alongside individual desires (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). As such, aspirational identities are encouraged by the organisation and even used as a means for organisational control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Being supported by organisations and desired by individuals means they lay the foundations for the Game, as the desirable meanings derived from aspirational identities become the motivation for individuals to play. The endorsement by the organisation also provides the reasoning for playing the Game in the context of the organisation, rather than seeking alternative spaces to play such as at other non-work organisations.

At Alpha, one dominant aspirational identity emerges from the discourses – that of the instrumental and heroic artist. I return here to some of the broader discourses and ideologies of the artist introduced in chapters two, three, and those articulated at Alpha in the previous two chapters. The myth of a great creator prevails as a dominant aspiration. This aspirational identity motivates individuals to work on themselves but also encourages them to look at their work as an aesthetic product of an artist:

I actually have ambition to make myself better as a programmer and as a human being as well just because I get to work with people that I admire . . . they create art and images that I really like. I like to be a part of that whole process . . . I like to create something that is close to art.

*Marcus, Producer*

Marcus as a producer, whose work we encountered earlier as “*basically like and HR manager*” constructs his aspirational identity through the fantasy of the artist, one that creates something close to art. He sees this in those he admires but also wishes it for himself. Here we see how the aspirational identity of the artist motivates even those who do not work in their everyday with the production of creative goods to desire to construct themselves as artists. Similarly to Marcus, Lara who works in HR also constructs her desired identity as a ‘creative person’ when asked if it’s important to be recognised as creative:



To recognise me as creative? Yeah I think that's really important because I see myself as a creative person and I know that if I had . . if I had grown up in another environment or a different family I think I would be doing more creative work as . . you know . . music or painting or creating like art in a way. Cause that's my dream.

*Lara, HR*

Despite sharing with me that her role had only a small capacity for such creative work, Lara states that it is really important to construct herself as a creative person but also to be recognised as creative by others. Here, the aspirational identity motivates even those in the organisation least involved in creative work, showing it as a highly desirable identity across the organisation. These aspirations also went so far as affecting individuals who desired to be seen as the ‘artist’ but felt they were not recognised as such. Gordon experiences this struggle as he paints a very vivid picture of how he sees himself as understood by others to be the ‘rose on the cake’ that nobody wants:

Since I came to the project I've been looked upon like this decoration on the top of a cake . . like sometimes there's like this marzipan kind of rose thing . . and I told them ‘I'm that rose’ . . it's like pink and it's beautiful and it adds something but no one really wants it . . because it doesn't really taste good [...] So it's just decoration, it's not important . . and I said that ‘that's who I am currently on the project’ and it's super frustrating and annoying [...] I'm not supposed to be a fucking rose on a cake . . I'm not here to sell the game and then have nothing of what I did is actually going to have an effect on the actual taste of the cake.

*Gordon, Game Designer*

The ‘them’ that Gordon speaks of is the senior game designers and producers. He struggles with an identity of someone who is ‘just there for decoration’ and not important. He desires to be instrumental to the game and have something of what he does to have an impact on the game. He craves to be the recognised and celebrated artist rather than just a beautiful ‘rose’ that looks good but tastes bad and is “*not important*”. It is clearly important for him have some significance, he craves ways to make his mark on the project – something that allows him to affirm himself as unique and special within the organisation. More specifically in Gordon’s narrative it we can see the importance of the role of others in affirming the aspirational identity of this artist, in particular by imprinting his mark on the game which others recognise.

### **The self-signature**

As players have the possibilities of joining the game – by being employed for their creative work for example, they need to develop the skills and equipment that are necessary to play. While most workers have the necessary training for producing works in video game development, either through formal education or self-training, there comes another more significant matter that is demanded by the Game in order to reach their aspirational identity of the artist. More specifically, this requires an imprint of the self in their work. What I call the self-signature is something that is unique to the self, a kind of identifier of the self in a piece of work. This is similar to Elsbach's (2009) discussion of the importance of designers' unique signature style in the affirmation of their creative identities. Designers were able to imprint their signature styles on a product of their creation and later have it recognised as being designed by them by other designers and collectors of the product. This imprint of the self can also be likened to an imprint of Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus is a unique combination of dispositions, as systems, which reflect our experiences and shape how we act or see the world (Bourdieu, 1977). While dispositions can be shared based on common experiences or backgrounds, the configuration of all dispositions of each individual are unique, allowing for novelty and creativity, but also the possibility for a unique imprint onto the world and a piece of creative work.

At Alpha there was a strong discourse about investing the self into your work and working with something that is a 'piece of you' and with creativity being a very personal experience:

I think for me . . this might be very personal but . . I really like the feeling of using my creativity to deliver a something that is unique to me 'this is a piece of me right there' [...] I find that very interesting and fun and engaging.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

But when I bring something to the table that they [colleagues] can't do . . that isn't based on expertise . . that isn't based on how long I've worked here . . that's based on me. And that's the difference between being good at something and having learnt something. That's sort of what I mean . . with the right tools anyone can be creative but some things you just have I think.

*Isaac, Level Designer*

I guess it's also a matter of not being too afraid of putting yourself out there. Because I guess being creative is a bit intimate in that sense . . it's very much you you're putting yourself out there . . like it's part of my personality and I'm expressing myself and it comes to music or art or something.

*Arthur, Games Artist*

These expressions of the self manifest in the form of some symbolic artefact which is a product of the work that the individual creates and in certain ways represents the self. This way could be recognised as a unique vision that makes an individual unique and identifiable in their creative production:

In that job [of creative director] you need to have a vision 'I think my game should be about character with no arms'. It's pure genius . . But also you are able to transform that vision into a gameplay 'okay but what does it mean for the games I work with?' So I had in my life a lot of examples where I had people where I was like 'wow their vision is so cool'. So those people the real genius, have the ability to develop a unique vision and you don't know where it comes from [...] You know the guy who designed the alien character? You know it comes from the stomach and it's like a spider? That idea is pure genius. Where does it come from? I don't know . . multiple sources of inspiration. Those people are very very very . . this one of the most important things in video games and there is not that many [geniuses] . . Most people pretend to be but they are not.

*Jimmy, Marketing*

For Jimmy these creatives have something unique that makes them rare. Their vision, and being able to incorporate it into the games they work on is what makes them identifiable as a 'real genius' as he states. Eddie, also emphasised a uniqueness to his work that reflects a quality of himself:

I talk to so many people especially within music [...] because a lot of the music I make can be . . it can be for a commercial shampoo for instance . . it could be that I write a piece of rock music or something [...] where people who have heard my music before they always say 'yes I can definitely hear this is you'. On the surface it's completely different but there is a way of interpreting rhythm and harmonies and . . that just shines through.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

He experiences this as being the case irrespective of the kind of work he does – his signature rhythm, harmonies or combination of these “*shines through*”. This seems to be a source of satisfaction and pride for him:

I think there is a dream . . . I would wish for people to recognise my work . . . without first reading that it's *my* work . . . to get a feeling like playing a game, hearing the music and going 'wait a minute I know this guy' and then they see that it's my work. That's the ultimate. It goes on top of fame and money and everything . . . it's just . . . because that would be true recognition.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

This “*true recognition*” is the identification and recognition of Eddie as the creator of a piece of work through only the experience of the work itself. Eddie states that this sort of recognition is the ultimate experience for him – that recognising him through his work goes above all other interests and potential motivations. The Game is enough of a motivator for Eddie to produce his work and continue in his desire to be recognised as his ideal self through this work. The works he produced become the mechanism through which the self is constructed and represented to others. The use of a self-signature in the work is a way to make the self recognisable to others when examining and evaluating the work produced. To be affirmed in the aspirational identity of the artist, it is not enough to self-recognise in one's work. Rather the work of the artist is constructed in the social and requires those knowledgeable in the language of the product produced to evaluate its quality, and to recognise the self-signature, and affirm the aspirational identity. When explored in this capacity it becomes clear that signatures are necessary as a means of acquiring distinction, where in cultural production almost all is a struggle and contest for distinction. This desire for distinction emphasizes that cultural works need to be evaluated in the social (Bourdieu, 1993).

### **Platforms for the self**

The medium onto which the self is expressed are the works produced by those aspiring to be recognised as artists. However, rather than analysing the works themselves in order to examine them for the imprints of the self, we must understand how these are shared with those who are in the positions of power to judge whether a work complies with the artistic ideal and whether a self can be recognised as an artist. The platforms are the stages through which the Game plays out. The Game is essentially an interaction of

selves and others through the platforms, as social mechanisms that enable their interactions. But these interactions are not like all others, they are for the purposes of evaluating and assessing cultural production and are constructed by aspirants and evaluators as such. The platform is a place where the aspirants' dispositions meet their desired positions in an attempt to take a desired position, in reference to Bourdieu's theory of position-taking (Bourdieu, 1993). Position taking is not guaranteed but occurs as a struggle between aspirant and the specific audiences for their works (Bourdieu, 1993). Elsbach (2009) similarly found in her study that identities were affirmed by the recognition of the signature by expert observers. These sites for identity affirmation also relate to Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010) concept of identity workspaces, which they define as an 'institution that provides the holding environment for identity work' (p. 45). Here I see the platforms for the self, not as rigid institutions but rather constructed spaces where aspirants share their work with their desired audience to evaluate their potential to take a desired position (that of artists). The players show off their skills and equipment in order to be scored or graded and have their audience decipher their suitability for taking up a position.

At Alpha there was a very strong sense that works were shared to be enjoyed but also evaluated by others:

So you get . . it's more like when people are finished with a certain part of the project they will they can send it out and share it with people. Yeah and sometimes people just find something in the game that looks nice and send out an email. So it doesn't have to be an artist that sends out his stuff when he's done - it can be anyone. Random things appear in the game depending on how we play, so you can find interesting stuff to send out.

*Max, Programmer*

For most aspects I think when people are being creative I think they like to share and people will comment and they're always like 'oh that was really nice' or 'good job' and stuff like that. So people do give feedback.

*Alice, Games Artist*

Max and Alice show how people were interested in sharing their work with others. Jack, an animator, talked about how this was a regular occurrence in his team with individuals asked to share work at least every Friday, where they received feedback:

*Jack:* Yeah now we are doing it weekly . . like on Fridays we show the work that we've done and we show how we've done it . . with colleagues. I think that's really good.

*Iva:* So you do that every week? On Friday and everybody has to show something?

*Jack:* Just animators do it on Friday. We get together we show on the TV what we've done. People give you feedback - good and bad and whatever.

Several interviewees discussed the importance for them to be able to get feedback from others on their work, which made them seek out opportunities, or platforms, to receive that feedback:

For that you kind of really need to see how other people react when you see other people in the company play. Since in Alpha we have quite a large group and a lot of people don't actually see what you're doing so you kind of have these small releases inside the company with other people to see how they react to it and that's something where you can get that motivation from for short term. But it gets really rough at some points when you see all the things you need to do and you have such a small time to do it and you encounter problems where you don't know how you will solve them . . and then you go into your little bubble and you down spiral until you manage to find something.

*Gary, Level Designer*

For Gary this feedback was a source of motivation, which made him revise his work in line with the feedback. Seeking feedback within the company relates to Bourdieu's idea of restricted production – where you produce to be evaluated by other producers, or those with the specialised knowledge or capital to be able to evaluate your work. This meant looking to colleagues or team leads as a source for the feedback:

Actually whoever I ask for feedback . . but usually my lead. But whoever is working with me at the time and whoever I can just turn around and say 'hey play this and see what you think' and then I can use that info or discard it depending on my goal with the actual thing that I want to have.

*Isaac, Level Designer*

And then after six months they took all the music I had which was wildly pointy along the edges and in all directions . . and I just gave it to a couple of key persons on the team and I said just listened to this and tell me what you think. 'Is the sound of the game in here somewhere?' and you get all the comments and the feedback and half of it was just discarded immediately it's like 'no no no this won't work, but the first 10 seconds and that one an intro

on that song . . .' and there was a discussion on the sound and from that you then start the final thing from scratch.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

People sought these platforms as a place where they could play the Game. Jack also spoke of a desire to create this platform through an application where features could be voted on:

I think there should be a way to share that data or those videos cause that motivates us . . . the workers. So we could have like a board or an application or something or even we can make up a voting system that place up things that are cooler to make like a chart of cool videos with nice features to share it and to place my feature . . . and everybody watches the video and shares it. Those are cool things that people want to see . . . not just in the game when it is shipped but now.

*Jack, Games Artist*

While there was a large dependence on feedback from the field of restricted production – that is from colleagues and peers, individuals also sought feedback from the end users, through things such as metacritic evaluation scores (online from gamers) and in test labs conducted with gamers at Alpha. These platforms were also institutionalised within the organisation in the way that an individual's creativity was evaluated as part of their annual job performance review where their manager was tasked to evaluate '*being creative*' as a core skill of the workers – with expected behaviour set and checks for it as '*satisfactory*' or '*to be developed*' (Alpha Job Performance Review Form). In this way identities were never permanently affirmed but rather 'worked on' as an on-going project of the self, which would see individuals return as players to the platform to present their work for evaluation and affirmation of their preferred identity as the artist they desired to be. As Isaac points out, he experiences the intense competition of the game where each player attempts to stand out from the rest:

It's when you excel at something . . . it's like you realise 'yeah I did this faster than anyone around me' . . . that's the best feeling here. Like I took this on because everyone else thought it was boring or stupid and I did it gallantly and people said 'wo that really that went well' and that's when you feel like you've proven yourself here. Because yeah . . . because it is hard competition in that sense. Everyone is so creative that when you do something out of the box and people congratulate you for it it's like 'wo cool'.

*Isaac, Level Designer*

Isaac feels able to prove himself at Alpha and have his identity affirmed despite the competition and facing tasks that himself or others may consider boring. He frames himself as the hero in this story who overcomes adversities to triumph and succeed at his goal of being recognised by others for his work. Yet in this narrative he also acknowledges that such triumphs are not shared by all and that the competition maintains the struggle of the game.

In this way the Game becomes a field of struggles or a “*battle for attention*” as one interviewee put it. Not all identities can be affirmed simultaneously, given the construction of the artist’s identity as rare and unique. This encouraged struggle for recognition of the self but also a persistence to return to the Game or see it as an on-going process where it’s like “*someone sculpting*” working on and revising the signatures and works presented in the platforms. This overlap between the project of the self and production may be specific to forms of cultural production which offers more of the conditions for the Game to take place – including its requirements for the value of work to be judged more broadly within a community of experts – or within Becker’s (1982) artworlds. While these artworlds do not have clear boundaries and only describe an ‘established network of cooperative links among participants’ (p. 35) they are a primary source for establishing the boundaries of what is valuable work. It is in the social space of this community that we see the Game taking place, which collectively determines the which individuals and works are to be recognised and which will not.

### ***Outcomes of Gameplay***

The outcomes of the game with the self are diverse and rather ambiguous. While in moments there are feelings of love, meaning and self-actualisation, other moments reflected darker more difficult and painful emotion work. This echoes calls for the temporality of meaningfulness of work (Bailey and Madden, 2017) but also the temporality and fluidity in the experiences of emotions more generally. The Game is then an on-going struggle – with uncertain outcomes and entangled in various unequal relations of power that result favourable and unfavourable outcomes for individuals. The elucidation of the implications and outcomes of the Game, therefore, requires the nestling further in the variety of affective experiences of creative workers at Alpha.



## Love and meaningfulness

As encountered in the previous chapter, love was a powerful emotion expressed by those working at Alpha. Individuals sought to experience love and meaning through “*putting [themselves] out there*” in an intimate way. In return they got feelings that were a “*rush*”, “*walking on clouds*” that are “*wonderful*” feelings. Feelings of love and happiness through work can be a source of meaningful experiences of work (Driver, 2017). These experiences of positive emotions were even more pronounced resulting from the Game, where positive feedback on work made individuals feel good, even “*warm and gooey*” as Eddie described:

[Music is] there to enhance or take away or add and sometimes for a very specific reason. But usually the most popular thing is just having a song play on the radio or a film like a diegetic, it's here and now, it's the score. So I think that's really hard, but of course if I read positive feedback 'oh I love the music in this' I get all warm and gooey.

*Eddie, Sound Engineer*

Eddie's music has a presence in the overall project that he identifies and that satisfies him, but his satisfaction is supplemented further by the recognition and appreciation by others of his work which gives him positive and 'gooey' feelings. This kind of recognition from others gives people motivation and a kind of meaningfulness to their work, as we see here with Jack:

*Iva: But do you get some kind of a reward . . some kind of satisfaction from doing something that is not so easy that is somehow difficult but then you get to the end and you feel . . ?*

*Jack: Yeah I think so. We do. When people like it of course. If you do nice stuff and in the end somebody goes by your monitor and sees a cool animation and they go 'wow nice stuff' and you feel good. That's the goal I think.*

*Iva: And then it motivates you to do more cool stuff? I guess you feel recognised for what you do?*

*Jack: Exactly. To me first I must like it a lot. If I don't like it I won't show anybody. But if I like it then the people around me are going to like it and when they say 'wow that's cool' you feel motivated to keep going and do more.*

Jack's attitude to his work was influenced by the expectations of what significant others might think of his work. He withheld showing his work to his colleagues until he felt they would think it was 'cool'. Such positive reactions influenced his relationship to his work and made him more motivated and invested in it. Others also exemplified the role of significant others on their feelings about their works. For Layton it was the recognition of his family and friends, but also imagined players, that influenced his experience of his work. This recognition helped him find similar purpose and satisfaction, as Eddie and Jack, in his work, especially compared to a '*boring desk job*':

One of the best aspects is I get to be very very creative in my work . . I have to say it's 9 to 5 . . even though it sounds like a boring desk job . . but I get to do games . . I get to do what I really love [...] and in the end I have created something that my friends and family can not only look at when they talk to relatives and say 'my son works at the company that makes those cars' but there will be an actual product that [...] people can go into and they can live through or play through my work . . and that is an immensely satisfying thought to me.

*Layton, Game Designer*

Layton's feelings of love and satisfaction from his work are caught up in the outcomes of the game – where audiences for his work value it, but also recognise it is as *his* work, an attribute and aspect of how he makes sense of himself.

### **Anxiety, ambivalence, and pain**

Such rosy accounts in the experiences of work were diffuse and punctuated by other more sobering emotions. It became observable to me that gameplay made several individuals anxious. Gordon, who we saw earlier express confidently the affirmation he felt from others as the 'creative guy' he desires to be, constructs here an almost desperate need for this very affirmation of his self through his work:

I'm super dependent on like a pat on the shoulder. People need to recognise what I do and they need to tell me that it was good. And I need that because I can't . . sometimes I do it myself . . like tell myself that that was really good. But I need other people to recognise me [...] I need people to see me as a creative guy and they need to see . . and I want them to understand how important it is . . and I want them to understand how good I am. But that's important . . it's like a revenge . . the world needs to understand. and it doesn't matter that one week ago I did this thing that a lot of people liked . . like even outside Alpha like when we show stuff to the world . . like that is directed by me or written by me or . . or the whole creative package is me on a

plate . . it's me . . everything that you see here is . . it pours . . it's me . . that's me. And if people love that . . one week later I've forgotten about it and I need a new . .

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Gordon's accounts perhaps exemplify the anxiety and ambivalence felt from playing the Game. While he felt recognised and affirmed in some moments, he felt a desperate need to present himself through his work and have that recognised by others. This anxiety was so strong that even works that he had been recognised for a week or so ago – even in larger platforms of “*outside Alpha*” were not sufficient to satisfy him one week later. The game creates an incessant need to fulfil desires and be recognised. Gordon later shows the impact of this insecure state - even stating that he would go to the extreme to leave the organisation if he were not able to get the recognition he craves:

*Iva: And how do feel if you don't get that recognition?*

*Gordon: I feel bad. But sometimes all I need is . . I need a boss that recognises that . . that sees me . . and I need something . . someone I can trust and I can understand is always there for me . . [...]*

*Iva: And if you were working at a place where you felt you didn't have that . . ?*

*Gordon: I would quit . . I wouldn't work there . . I couldn't because it would affect my life too much. I would feel too bad.*

Failure to get recognised through the Game has such a powerful impact on individuals that causes them to threaten exit from the organisation, in the case of Gordon. Resulting from such powerful and troubling experiences, the self becomes deeply implicated in the creative work at Alpha. The creative works that are produced become somewhat personal because they represent but also constitute the self, and in that a way the individuals become sensitive to the responses of significant others to their work. Several individuals talked about work being like their ‘baby’ and struggling with having very strong reactions to other’s treatment of their work:

The most frustrating aspect of this is if you’re working on a prototype project and for some reason it doesn’t get approved [...] This was your baby that you were working on.

*Marcus, Producer*

I still get very upset and passionate. Like I would feel very strong about something and I would be protecting it like it's my baby and I could be upset to the core of me because *it is* the core of me and then I could regret for being so upset afterwards [...] so I need to take all the good with the bad . . *like everything is a part of me*.

*Gordon, Game Designer*

Different contexts that I find I struggle . . one is like I said I deliver my creativity to somebody else and they do something with my creativity. If that person doesn't take care of the work that I provide them then it becomes difficult to hand your baby over to them which was a problem with a few people earlier in the project [...] I would like to get recognition for the job I've done among the people I'm doing it for. So that's one thing . . if I don't trust the person that I'm supposed to deliver [my work] to that affects me.

*Kyle, Programmer*

Kyle's earlier experiences have led to distrust of some people he has worked with in the past and to strong feelings about allowing others to work with his 'baby'. Layton also experienced these feelings of having his work rejected as very painful:

Um well again with this project that I was talking about that I was immensely proud of it was eventually scrapped so . . That was quite painful to be honest. It can be very very very painful because I was very proud of the work we had done and I was a very happy with the work itself . . And I had put a lot of myself into it and then it took a while to readjust. And for a while I was quite bitter that I had to work on a project that I thought was less creatively satisfying.

*Layton, Game Designer*

Such experiences of having work cut or rejected appeared to be frequent and largely “*disheartening*” as they were shared with me by a number of individuals. Lara, working in HR had witnessed people experiencing such emotions and tried to make sense of why this occurred:

See that's why it hurts so much if somebody cuts [something] off . . or if they criticize it. So you need to be both brave and a bit hard but still when it's creative work you need to be very sensitive and give a part of yourself - so I think that's why it's so difficult. If you put yourself into it and it doesn't go well it's really hard not to take it a bit personal . . so it really hurts. And after if this happens I think after a while you get very distant and you say 'ok I will not put myself in this at all'.

*Lara, HR*

Lara tries to make sense of people's reactions to their experiences of things not going well with their investments of themselves. She describes a sort of distancing of the self and a loss of meaningfulness of their work:

You know you have to kill your darlings over and over again and if you put so much time and effort in everything and it all gets cut . . . you know they could get cut out and everything then what happens? I mean you will lose the meaningfulness for what you do and that's devastating for them.

*Lara, HR*

While this devastation was “*very painful*”, we see primarily how this amounts to a great deal of insecurity and ambivalence for those playing the Game. Doing something they love is simultaneously experienced as rewarding and painful. Working on the self in organisations and through work may leave individuals insecure, vulnerable and has an impact on their well-being (Collinson, 2003). We can see how this occurs at Alpha for those engaging in gameplay described here. When aspirational identities are not confirmed or selves not recognised or respected in the work, feelings of pain and disappointment as well as articulations that withdraw and disengage surface. In this section it has been important to explore both positive and negative experiences of playing the Game in order to reveal the depths of these various outcomes (Fineman, 2006). Ultimately these depths reveal a darker side to feelings of love and meaning at work. They also offer an explanation for the feelings of love for work, but also for its temporality. Love is not a permanent state but rather the illusory promise of the Game. The Game is a mechanism of power relations, where selves are driven by desires to be constructed as on-going accomplishments whose form is largely dependent upon the subjective valuations of others. Winning the Game and being affirmed in the identity of the artist reinforces a positive sense of self and that the feelings of love and commitment to work were worthwhile. Fail in being affirmed by having your work challenged, cut or not recognised and the consequences can be more dire – both in the short and long term. In the short term feelings of pain result from challenges of reconciling the desired self with the affirmed one. In the long term continued struggle to have the desired self affirmed by others can have lasting effects on workers' motivation but also well-being.

## *Coping Through Craft*

These ongoing experiences challenge the ability of workers to establish a positive sense of self due to the incongruence between desires and experiences. Therefore, the continued experience of ambivalence, instability and painful experiences might inspire exodus from the organisation looking elsewhere for the fulfilment of their desired selves – as Gordon threatens were he not able to get the recognition he so desires. Those who did not consider exit spoke of learning to “*take it on the chin*” or just becoming numb to the experience over time. Withdrawals from work – “*I will not put myself in this at all*” as Lara observes - mimic some of the self-management strategies already described in the works of Kunda (1992), Casey (1995) and Hochschild (1983) where workers attempt to control the self-work relation by distancing constructions of self from work. Attempting to remove selves from work can assist workers to cope better with the challenges that result from their tight coupling. Yet the demands and normative pressures placed on the worker at Alpha – for one who has ownership and a love for one’s work are difficult to reconcile with the detached worker.

After several individuals shared a similar narrative I saw another alternative means for coping with the “*roller coaster*” of feelings experienced from playing the Game. I began to observe a growing discourse in the organisation that worked to shift the target idealised position in the field of positions from that of the prized ‘artist’ to that of a ‘craftsman’. Several individuals made the distinction of the craftsman from other creative types including the artist:

I think that craftsman doesn’t have to be creative . . . He can work with another person who is really creative maybe a director or . . . but a craftsperson can also be creative of course, it depends on the personality but craftsmanship is really about I mean if it’s art it’s about making something really beautiful [...] And you have that in music you know a good musician doesn’t really have to be able to write good songs [...] but then you have other musicians who are great craftsmen and they can play it and really heighten it and bring it to life because they are good craftsman. So yeah I think there is a separation between being . . . I think being creative is more about ideas . . . unique and new ideas. No it’s not at all the same as the craftsmanship and since we talked about that . . . I think there are two types of creativity. There is sort of the easy common one which we use most of the time and then there is the more rare and harder one. So the first one is the easy one and a thing that people use most of the time doing variations on a theme.

*Ray, Programmer*

For Ray being an artist or creative is unique and rare, it's about making something beautiful. The craftsman on the other hand works with others (creative others such as artists) and heightens their work. Craftsmanship is less about ideas and more about working hard to perfect a work by perhaps doing variations on a theme and without 'really' being creative by his definition. Adam also emphasises the distinctions between being an 'artist' and being a 'craftsman':

Being able to be creative in the game context . . . and to me that's very different to being creative as an artist . . . because like someone I used to work with said that 'we are not artists, we are craftsmen' and I completely agree with that. We are . . . because a craftsman can't be an artist right? The craftsman has to deliver something that's functional and people can use . . . And I think that's exactly what we're doing. Like creativity for us is creativity in context and that's the main difference.

*Adam, Game Designer*

Adam constructs his craftsmanship identity as one that is different from an artist – focusing on the functional aspects of design. This focus on functionality downplays qualities of the artist, preferring instead a concern with making goods that are focused on utility over aesthetically pleasing to a broader audience. The interest in contextualizing work and framing it within clearer boundaries was of particular interest to Adam, as well as making ways of evaluating work more transparent:

But with a more strict process where you have to - everyone in the room has to agree go through the fundamentals and then go to the next step and agree again. Which is what we're doing now which is a method that has been used on another project in Montréal. I think that's going to work a lot better and everyone is gonna end up a lot more happy. Maybe you lose a little bit of freedom but that's as I was saying were not artists – it's not a problem you can make a good design within framework as long as the framework is clear and of course the framework is reasonable.

*Adam, Game Designer*

Many others also articulated their desires to work within clearer boundaries for their work, even going to the extent of calling creativity without such a frame “*weird*”. The desires for clearer boundaries somewhat conflict with the heroic artist who operates on the basis of his unique and unrestrained imagination. However, as John explains, these boundaries make it easier to cope with the judgement of one's work:

And also there is no . . . For example if I were to output my own art . . . let's say I'm going to post something in a forum or on Facebook . . . Then it doesn't have a specific purpose in the sense that it's something that people expect to see [...] and when you *have to* output something it's a lot easier to output something . . . but when it's just up to me to post it any day and it could be great work or not so great work then I think it's also tough to . . . the judges are worse . . . they are just people who judge because they want to . . . They can choose not to like the picture or comment on it or do anything.

*John, Games Artist*

So while involving a greater degree of objectivity in guiding and evaluating work, for example a functional approach to creative work encourages evaluation in a more structured and transparent manner (either the work serves the function or does not), it also allows them to escape some of the challenges and painful experiences of having their work subjectively valued. Pressures of having to produce something and reducing ambiguity of judgements makes work easier while offering many of the benefits of the artist aspirational identity – as John states later about his craftsmanship “*and I can even find the same kind of satisfaction, at least sometimes, in that kind of creativity as I would do when I have done an art related task*”. Aspiring to the identity of the craftsman allows him to retain feelings ownership and pride in his work while playing down some of the pressures and negative emotions experienced as part of identifying as an artist. In this way the craftsman identity does not eliminate all of the ideals that are encouraged by the Game at Alpha. Ownership and autonomy of work are maintained as the craftsman can work within the frame to decide on the tools and means of delivering on the required functionality. Craftsmanship also maintains a pride in work, use of specialised skills and advanced techniques, and it allows individuals to imprint a signature on the work – maintaining the engagement of the self with work. Marcus describes how these qualities are reinstated in the craftsman identity:

It's kind of like we're moving more into the craftsman territory so it's more like you're given a commission to do an object or a painting. And you're using your skills in a fairly novel way in order to do it. So like I don't think building one of these residential buildings is actually creative . . . but building a cathedral would require you to be creative to solve these engineering problems of having the domes stay in place and basically you're being creative in how you decorate it and so on. So I think what most people think about programming is that it's like building these residential buildings . . . when you're using computers when you're using a



program you're expecting it to work and not be in your way so this is kind of like your normal flat would be . . it's a nice place to live in but there's nothing special about it.

*Marcus, Producer*

Marcus associates the skills of a craftsman with that of a builder of a cathedral. He talks about a certain care for one's work, one which is lacking in other types of programming, so that it still allows him to distinguish his work as creative vis-a-vis other workers. The craftsman identity allows Marcus to still construct his work as 'art' and as something special that is different from the ordinary work produced by other programmers.

Adopting this alternative subject position that offers some similar qualities to the artist aspirational identity, allows individuals to cope and reduce painful feelings of rejection of the self in work while maintaining a pride and meaning in work. The changing of the field of positions was also evident in the talk of those more senior in the organisation, showing how even at that level priorities are changing:

We look very much when we hire at the craftsmanship and the skill of what they are doing. Then if we have a lot of skilled craftsman then usually things start to happen anyway.

*Frank, Producer*

As discourses of the craftsman identity start to proliferate the organisation, more individuals work to change their aspirational positions in the game to that of the craftsman. Reducing the negative consequences from the game allows them to maintain and develop their self through work, but also maintain a love for their work. Ultimately the craftsman ideal may also be a reason to why we see love for work maintained even despite changing work conditions that remind us of industrialised and bureaucratised factories. Rather than disengaging or feeling alienated, a craftsman identity is a resistance in the face of the de-skilling of work through management control or the routinisation of work and de-familisation of workplaces.

## ***Summary***

Using the metaphor of a game, this chapter has explored the relation between love and self and has further explained the intricate relation between these constructs in the creative work carried out at Alpha Games. At Alpha, some of the conditions and mechanisms of gameplay become clear – based on aspirations towards a desired identity, through the imprinting of the self in work (signature) and through the distribution of

work as constitutions of self in available platforms for feedback from significant others - workers navigate and experience themselves. Connecting this to Bourdieu's field of cultural production we observe the sites where these qualities meet as 'sites of struggle'. These struggles are owing to the ways in which work is valued – primarily through subjective and contested means. What we have seen at Alpha is that aspiring to the dominant aspirational identity of the great artist dampens chances of winning the game as many compete but few are recognised in the position. Thus love and meaning derived from this position are transient as new creative works and workers attempt to displace the old. The competitive nature of the game results in experiences of anxiety, ambivalence and even pain which challenge workers' self-understandings. To cope, workers attempt to shift the aspirational identity from the great artist to the craftsman – one whose recognisable skillset and transferable methods as well as emphasis on functionality over aesthetics attempts to induce levels of objectivity in the valuation of work. Ultimately, as I will discuss in the following chapters, this alternative desired identity position attempts to stabilise selves and feelings against the backdrop of a highly political and contested terrain. While maintaining many of the features of creative work – ownership of work, autonomy, pride in work, it also maintains many of the features of the game and the close relation of selves to work. Craftsmanship seems promising for worker well-being at Alpha, but its relation to the conditions of work and cases of self-exploitation remain in question – as does the sense of any significant of escape from the highly political and emotionally challenging nature of creative work.



## 8. The Game Revisited

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This chapter delves further into the metaphor of the Game described in the previous chapter. By applying a theoretical lens to the Game, as well as selves in relations of play at Alpha, this chapter endeavours to develop our understandings and offer new theorising around the experiences of creative work. The empirical chapters that precede this one illustrate a complex web of relations that demands a careful theoretical examination. I begin by first summarising the empirical stories of the last three chapters before moving examining the Game from a more theoretical plane. The nature of play is constructed as one based on competition for elusive and desirable positions, and refers once again to Bourdieu's writing on cultural production – as a 'field of struggles'. These struggles are contested and negotiated in the social relations of creative work that attempt construct selves in line with aspired-to-identities. These aspirational identities are proscribed by social conditions, and more specifically, dominant discourses echoed throughout Alpha. These dominant discourses construct the ideal worker at Alpha as one who is autonomous, creative and loving towards one's work. The demands of these ideals produce various experiences of selves – ranging from positive feelings to darker, more ambiguous and challenging experiences. I argue that rather than causing the grip on selves to loosen and for self-distancing from work to occur, this ambivalence in the affectual relations of creative workers narrows the distance between selves and work – increasing the consciousness of selves but also encouraging the collapsing of selves into work. This tightening of the relations between selves and work, resulting from the Game, entangles selves to work, while also suturing emotion work and affectual relations as paramount to creative work.

### *The Story So Far*

Over the last three chapters this thesis has explored the experiences of selves and work shared with me at Alpha, as well as how these are embroiled in an emotional context. Organisationally, we saw how creative work at Alpha was arranged around the ideologies of agency and ownership as well as fantasies of the artist. Yet while these ideals were shared with delight in the talk of many at Alpha, their experience of working life seemed to challenge these very ideals. Many shared fears of creative work at Alpha becoming like factory work – with the standardisation of work methods and outputs and a loss of the familial. The agency and ownership was further put into question by the

pressures of deadlines and being asked to invest a considerable amount of their own time into work projects. It was, for this reason, surprising to see the amount of love that was expressed for the work that was completed at Alpha by the workers, some (like Fisher) going to the extent of turning the harsh realities into a badge of pride – for example pride of doing the most hours than anyone else in the whole company. This love for work was constructed as more than just a way to cope with harsher conditions of work (blinding love), more than commitment to work as morally good and right, and more than a purely hedonistic pursuit of work. Rather work gave meaning to the self. Through work one was able to fashion an ideal or desirable version of self that infused the sense of self with love and meaning.

In the previous chapter I described how this ability to develop the self through work was not only accepted but encouraged at Alpha. Aspirations combined with the means and opportunities to realise these are offered to the workers organisationally, and we saw how many attempted, but also struggled, to fulfil these aspirations. In coping with the disappointment of failing to realise aspired selves we also saw how individuals attempt to shift the target identities for their aspirations, in doing so attempting to stabilise valuations of their work to more objective targets by aspiring instead to a ‘craftsman’ identity – one that attempts to mediate between structure, transparency and aesthetics, all while maintaining aspects of autonomy and a love for work. I will speak more about the craftsman as the alternative aspirational identity to the heroic artist in the next chapter, but first, I will go further in exploring the organisation of the game, both empirically and theoretically and theorise how aspects of the Game play out.

### ***Theorising the Game***

The use of the metaphor of the game is particularly pervasive in the field of organisation studies. Games describe the engagement of actors in a field framed by various rules and motives. Antecedents of games enable gameplay to take place while outcomes are decided by the players’ interactions with structural dimensions that govern gameplay. When these structural dimensions, such as rules for gameplay, are not fixed but rather fluid and negotiated – outcomes too become contested and challenged, but also varied and changing. In this section I will discuss some of these more observable dimensions of the game – including the nature of play in the Game (and its comparison to other types of organisational gameplay) and the development through dominant organisational and societal discourses of ‘ideal’ or aspirational Alpha worker. Theorising about the

configuration of these structures allows us to further understand the resulting relations and experiences that it produces, as well as those that produce it.

### **The Nature of Play**

Returning to the work of Bourdieu on the field of cultural production we can theorise how some of the gameplay occurs in the Game at Alpha. According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is a theoretical model that considers the interactions between individuals and structural dimensions and the social relations that result (Bourdieu, 1993). The field, in his case of art and literature, is the ‘space of literary and artistic position takings’ where the ‘manifestations of the social agents involved in the field – literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics’ (p. 30) are inseparable from the space and compete for positions that enable them to possess a certain capital – in this case recognition. For Bourdieu, artists and their works compete for a limited number of positions and for the distribution of a limited amount of recognition. In this way the field of cultural production is a ‘*field of forces*’ but also a ‘*field of struggles*’ (Bourdieu’s emphasis, p. 37) where no positions are guaranteed and are continuously contested. Meanings artistic works are constantly negotiated between producers and consumers of these works. Positions and position takings are therefore highly political and power-laden, making current but also aspired-to-positions more or less desirable (Bourdieu, 1993).

Dominant discourses influence and attempt to fix what is considered desirable in organisations through the exercise of power (Czarniawska, 1988; Mumby, 1988). It is these guiding discourses that stimulate game play and competition between individuals, with particularly elusive and highly valued position-takings constructing a more competitive terrain (around which more recognition capital is offered but with greater risks for achievement). Individuals engage in games in order to influence outcomes in favour of their interests. This struggle for supremacy is perhaps representative, in a very general sense, of most types of Agôn games (Caillois, 1961) played in and outside of organisations. Many attempts have been made to make sense of these highly political games within organisations by scholars closely examining organisational life and work practices (Ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Bozionelos, 2005; Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Burawoy, 1979; Maccoby, 1976). While all games require actors who have an interest in playing the games and the necessary knowledge or socio-political skills to navigate the game terrain, what maintains consistence across

organisational games studied is the contested and political nature of moves and outcomes.

One such example of organisational gameplay is described by Buchanan and Badham (2008) who theorise that organisational changes inspire political game play in which people attempt to protect their 'turf' through means such as 'power and influence, status and reputation, access to control over resources; people, information, space, and money' (Buchanan and Badham, 2008, p. 15). Individuals engage their socio-political skills or 'political expertise' in order to influence outcomes of organisational changes in line with what they believe to be 'right' and appropriate in organisational terms (Buchanan and Badham, 2008). In Buchanan and Badham's idealised gameplay the desirable outcome for the player is one which has moral value for the organisation.

While organisational interests may be taken into account, many organisational games are played where the moves are attempts to influence outcomes in favour of more personal interests. Maccoby's (1976) gamesman is similarly portrayed as an entrepreneurial actor who may do 'whatever it takes' to win. Unlike Buchanan and Badham's notion of the political entrepreneur who plays the game in the interest of the moral good, Maccoby's gamesman is motivated to compete for the 'fame, glory, the exhilaration of running his team and of gaining victories' (p. 100). This growing class of actors in corporate America, Maccoby argues, is playing interrelated games and thriving on the competition that amounts from them. Their motivation is the idea of winning and for the spoils of being successful ahead of peers in whatever the competition may be. This materialises all sorts of compulsions - working longer, harder, smarter all in attempt to avoid failure. This behaviour escalates the sense of competition between workers and feeds delusions and fantasies of the players own limitless potential, eventually culminating in a crisis when these fantasies are not realised (Maccoby, 1976).

While Maccoby's gamesman appears internally driven there are broader social structures that enable and encourage such gameplay to take place. Organisations may secure advantages from individuals' competitive activity and drive for constant improvement. Similarly, games may produce other beneficial effects, including for the workers themselves. In his now famous study Buroway (1979) studied how the game of 'making out' was organised in piece-rate factory work of the 1970s. Workers navigated a socio-political system which, if played well, allowed them to maximise on their work. While there were some economic gains from successfully 'making out' Buroway argues that the primary motivations for workers to play the game came from the excitement of

playing the game, but also from the distraction it offered from less pleasant aspects of factory work – fatigue, boredom as well as psychological frustration with the work at the factory (Burawoy, 1979). As well as offering a means for coping with these conditions, playing the game allowed workers to earn the ‘psychological rewards of making out on a tough job’ while avoiding the ‘social stigma and psychological frustration attached to failing on a gravy job’ (Burawoy, 1979, p. 85). To succeed in attaining such rewards meant that workers had to negotiate the system of relations that played out as political struggles.

### **Creative work as gameplay**

This sense of struggle is a feature of most competitive games as players attempt to surmount adversities in order to emerge triumphant. Creative work, as experienced at Alpha, demands the investment and involvement of selves – requiring a personal and more direct engagement with the products and outcomes of the game. The sphere of cultural production calls upon producers to distinguish themselves from other producers and to ‘make one’s name’, for which producers rely on their unique configuration of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 39 ). Creative work necessitates the integration of the self as part of the production of value. ‘Newness’ and innovation requires the break from the past – one that is accomplished through the application of unique dispositions of a producer. Producers attempt to legitimise the uniqueness of their works by imprinting them with a recognisable signature with which they make attempts to convince an audience of its distinction in the field of production (Bourdieu, 1993). It is precisely the contested value of creative works and the calling upon selves in their production that differentiates this organisational game from others. The nature of the struggle is not only produced for the ‘fun of game play’ but rather a necessary part of creative work.

The social dimension of creative work is that it demands a community of experts to recognise value of work (Becker, 1982). While attempts at objective measures abound at Alpha in terms of ‘metacritic scores’ and quantitative feedback from gamers – the majority of work is evaluated in a subjective means and through the abstruse notion of ‘taste’ or ‘quality’. As such, platforms - as systems and spaces for appropriating creative works are established to contest the grounds of these notions. What is ‘creative’, ‘good work’, ‘bad work’ are negotiated in the social spaces of these platforms. At Alpha we saw the prolific establishment of different types of platforms. Individuals also actively sought these out as spaces to get feedback, but also play the game. These platforms may



take the form of institutional practices (weekly meetings) or institutions such as online internal forums or the organisational performance review carried out on each worker that attempts to fix a sense of how creative work or an individual is. It is in these moments of contestation that determine who or what can be recognised in a desirable subject position. As Bourdieu states:

*‘Cultural production is a site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer’ (1993, p. 42).*

Bourdieu’s use of the ‘writer’ is an example of a position in the field of cultural production which is disputed frontier through means of power. Legitimacy of positions and position-takings of individuals is a constant struggle over socially defining who is and who is not considered a part of the desired position. Thereby, works are open to be challenged as to whether they satisfy the claims they make, and due to convictions about good and bad works ‘competitors can exclude each other from the field’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 80). This results in an endless state of competition as individuals try to pit each other to the post to establish themselves in desired positions and redefine these positions in their favour. However, the elusiveness of elite yet desirable positions, the increase of competition between producers, and the subjective and political nature of the determination of outcomes implies that not all will be successful in their gameplay. While determination of wins and losses as politically contested was not unusual from other organisational gameplay introduced so far, the nature of play – the involvement and experience of selves directly in the gameplay differs from these other metaphoric games.

Similarly, the positions that individuals aspire to (or the ‘winnings’) of the Game may differ to those of other games. In the case of Alpha we observe how this position of the aspirational identity is framed by the dominant discourses shared by workers at Alpha. These discourses regulate how work is ideally completed but also by who is considered successful in these endeavours. At Alpha we initially saw this identity built on a worker who is agentic, able to exemplify the qualities of the heroic artist but also shows a loving commitment to one’s work. These demands frame the qualities of the

‘ideal worker’ or player at Alpha and I will move to discuss these specific features of this creative worker identity as they are constructed at Alpha.

### **The ideal player at Alpha**

The discourses and ideologies around autonomy, ownership, and fantasies of the artist encountered in chapter five construct the notion of the ideal worker at Alpha. The construction and regulation of the ideal worker occurs through the ‘self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organisation with which they become more or less identified and committed’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 620). Thornborrow and Brown (2009) argue how this regulation of selves and identities occurs through mechanisms that discipline individuals via ‘preferred conceptions of self’ (p. 356) as an effect of power. In the context of Alpha we have seen how these ‘preferred conceptions of self’ act to regulate selves and aspirational identities in line with organisationally available discourses. In their talk, workers stressed the importance of autonomy, ownership, creativity, and love, for their self-understandings. These characteristics reflect what Flecker and Hofbauer (1998) describe as the development of a ‘model worker’ where individuals are encouraged to self-align themselves with organisationally sanctioned ideals with the effort to produce desirable working conditions for both organisations and individuals.

At Alpha the ideal worker is constructed as one who is autonomous, creative, but also displays a love for one’s work. What is particularly of interest is why these specific qualities of the ideal worker are reinforced at Alpha and who they work to serve. The argument to be made here is that these features embrace many of the favourable images of the creative worker we saw already established by the literature in chapters two and three. Their connection to the more societal positioning of creative work as something that is imbued with positivity, novelty, mystery, but also the space for self-expression are reinforced in the organisational discourses. These in turn serve both the organisation and the individuals – which is what I will argue, motivates individuals to play the Game but also the organisation to sustain it.

The autonomous, creative and loving worker is an ideal player of the Game. More specifically, the ideal worker exhibits qualities of the great artist who is special and unique and uses this ‘specialness’ to deliver creative works that are valued by the audiences they produce these for. This creative worker is also autonomous, taking ownership of their work while instilling a love for their work that sees them desire to be

a special, industrious and committed worker at Alpha. Workers abide by these demands and rules of play because they serve their own interests – to have their desired selves recognised and realised. The qualities of the ideal player then align the individual interests with organisational interests with the promise of the mutual benefit to both. The qualities idealised in the talk and texts observed at Alpha target the aspirations and desires of workers and aligns these with ideas about what is valued and considered successful at Alpha. The alignment of individual desires with organisational ones sets the roots for the Game and blueprints for how one might win. Players performing in line with these organisationally sanctioned qualities, are given the opportunities to be recognised as and experience themselves in their desired identities, while simultaneously serving organisational goals.

A question that comes to the fore now is why do individuals experience *these* desires and what motivates them to pursue these desires at Alpha? To answer the first part of this question we need to explore both the discourses connected to broader spheres surrounding creative work, already introduced in chapters two and three, but also those articulated at Alpha. Firstly, the alignment of individuals' desires with that of the ideal worker is congruent with and affirmed by broader discourses around creativity, autonomy and love for work as being generally desirable. Creativity is constructed as a positive phenomenon (Negus and Pickering, 2000) and concept is wrapped in an all too positive discourse that promises a socially valued identity (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Prichard, 2002; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). The myth of creative genius attributed to one individual has been carefully disputed by more collective accounts of how creative works are produced (cf. Becker, 1982), yet remains a part of the ideology and mystique of the creative which attributes mysterious psychological abilities that cause thinking to 'break away from the habitual and the ordinary' and to exercise a kind of 'special thinking' which is unique to the individual (Weisberg, 1993 p. 7). According to McRobbie (1998) this mystique, while consistently challenged, maintains its aura and promise for self-fulfillment which entices workers into creative fields. The organisation goes further to support such images of the lone creative genius by emphasizing in their corporate materials the indescribable and ambiguous quality of 'imaginative skill' which alludes to the romanticised fantasies of the artist introduced in chapter three. Such ideals are further reinforced in the workers' idealisation of famous artists and directors – which further constructs the ideal creative self as one who is unique, special and produces work that is equally unique and revered by others.

The notions of autonomy and self-determination overlap with discourses of this romantic figure of the artist who is seen as a heroic figure. The not too dissimilar image of the self-enterprising subject who is ‘the unified psychological focus of his or her biography, as the locus of legitimate rights and demands, as an actor seeking to ‘enterprise’ his or her life and self through acts of choice’ (Rose, 1998, p. 170) which to Rose is a part of our late modern existence. This is consistent with Giddens’ project of the self for which ‘the individual is responsible’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). The autonomous worker is one who is solely responsible for a piece of work and makes decisions about how it is to be produced. This coupled with a sense of a flat organisational structure at Alpha creates the impression of a worker who is relatively agentic in determining their conditions, inputs but also outcomes of work. Together with a meritocratic ideal this adjoins the creative worker to experiences of other contemporary knowledge worker, where attention is on the individual worker and their knowledge to deliver on work and organisational outcomes over that of collective, structural or material means (Alvesson, 2004; Starbuck, 1992). In contrast to the highly rationalised bureaucracy that emphasises a clear division of labour, this new symbolic knowledge worker is expected to be relatively independent in determining how to produce their work (Flecker and Hofbauer, 1998). These discourses and ideals of the enterprising self leave individuals ultimately responsible for their successes, but also for their failures. This individualisation, or separation of the individual from community or collective, serves the Game as it encourages competition based on self-interests and fastens the self in its relations to work and the Game.

Love for work, does a double shift in the context of creative work. Love is both the ideal and desired state of being reached through working, but also a regulated self that is demanded from the creative subject working at Alpha. Recall Frank, a producer on the game responsible for employing many of the game makers. He states that “*it’s important to us that they are so in love with what they do*” meaning that potential employees need to show a love and commitment to video game development – even beyond the formal boundaries of work: “*okay so you don’t play games in your spare time? You don’t programme in your spare time (...) okay well maybe we’re not the employer for you*”. In doing so Frank makes it clear what kind of employee is desired by the organisation – regulating the boundaries of what is included in the definition of the ideal Alpha worker. The ideal Alpha worker is then one who is devoted to and loves game development. If employment applicants at Alpha are unable to articulate this love

for game development then Alpha is framed as '*not the place for [them]*'. Frank's statement might perhaps be an extreme example of how this regulation occurs. One can imagine that this sort of delimitation of workers occurs through much subtler discursive practices in everyday life. Still, it tells us how this discourse to regulates and disciplines workers by dictating the appropriate expectations, norms and demands on workers at Alpha.

This type of regulation of employees through love and affect for the purposes of video game development have already been noted by Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2003) who speculate that digital media companies 'depend on harnessing a bona fide enthusiasm for game creation – a rather maniacal and macho (not to say masochistic) enthusiasm, perhaps, but nonetheless a digital labour of love' (p. 200). Following these observations, the study of Alpha provides an in-depth look at how this enthusiasm and love is constituted in the processes of worker regulation by management more directly. Further, this kind of enthusiasm and commitment to work also demands workers to go beyond the contractual conditions of work in order to work long hours, forsaking better paid work opportunities, time with family as well as giving up alternative jobs or hobbies. The loving ideal player at Alpha does this and more to prove their love and commitment to their work and for the opportunities to play the Game and be positioned in accordance with their aspired identities.

Returning again Bourdieu's thinking to the Game we might see how it is these qualities of the ideal position that motivates workers to construct themselves in accordance with those that are reinforced more broadly and echoed within the organisation. Those positions that are reinforced appear more desirable than others and offer more of Bourdieu's 'recognition capital'. Workers desire be seen by others as autonomous, creative, and show a loving commitment to their work. The identity of the great artist embodies all of these qualities and becomes one of the dominant positions workers aspire to - with varied successes. This however, as we have seen in the last chapter, is not the only identity that fulfils this criteria and workers attempt to navigate between these positions while still fulfilling many of the aspirational ideals of the Game.

The connecting question we might reach here is what is the interest for the organisation to promote *these* qualities of creative work over qualities? In terms of the quality of being creative, as it pertains to a uniqueness and specialness this is highly beneficial to a creative organisation such as Alpha. In organisations where creative products are the main output, creativity becomes necessary for producing and delivering

their creative products (Jeffcutt and Pratt, 2002). Markets for Alpha's products and their consumers (video game players) are motivated by the 'latest and greatest' designs – making creativity a very important source of differentiation from competitor games and alternative products (Tschang, 2007). The significance of creativity for the organisation is evidenced in the corporate and other textual material produced by both Alpha and Grassroots. In this way Alpha's interests are to reinforce creative activity and products. These interests then work to align with the interests and desires of individuals for fulfilling aspirational identities of the creative artists and doing creative work inspired by the broader discourses around creativity and creative identities.

Being able to fulfil these aspirations in a secure and stable environment also draws workers to Alpha over other alternatives for fulfilling desired identities of creative work. Unlike the highly precarious nature of work across the creative industries (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Ross, 2008), as well as the precarity of 'going it alone', Alpha offers a certain stability in terms of secure and fixed employment. This stability allows individuals to focus on the job at hand, rather than concerns of where their next paycheck is going to come from or who their next funder will be. The security offered by Alpha coupled with its emphasis on the autonomous worker who 'owns' their work appeals as a relative advantage in contrast to alternatives. One such alternative that makes this point vivid is Adam's description of the Vancouver studio which he saw as a "*game factory*" and where you were "*a resource amongst 2,000 other people*" or an "*ant in an ant farm*". To stress this point further he articulated how in Vancouver you were not even considered "*a creative human being*" in contrast to Alpha where he considered it still possible to be recognised as one. As such, these comments speak to the importance of visibility – being seen and recognised by others for the realisation of selves as desired identities, but also to the fact that workers see Alpha as a place where this is more likely to happen vis-à-vis alternatives.

The Game accentuates this visibility. Being recognised as creative is made possible through the mechanisms of the Game that become socially constructed such as the ability to imprint a self in one's work through a signature and through the distribution of works that bare this signature across many of the possible platforms for work (and self-) valuation. However, these mechanisms are set up to not only value workers against the quality of creativeness but also around the other qualities of the ideal player – their creativity, autonomy, ownership of work, but also their love and commitment for their work. At Alpha this occurs through the domination and proliferation of certain

discourses over others. These set demands for what is expected of workers but also of the boundaries for the game as well as who or what can be recognised as the ideal Alpha worker. This ideal creative worker is an autonomous, creative, loving, and committed worker.

Given that the Game encourages rather personal experiences of selves directly in its processes, observations of emotions such as love, anxiety even ambivalence were not curious to the experiences at Alpha. The works produced at Alpha by creatives are largely experienced as a part of their self-understandings “*this is a piece of me right there*” – entangling selves in the processes of production. Works, as an outcome of production, are then representative but also constitutive of selves – with many individuals struggling emotionally to distance themselves from their works. This entanglement strengthens and is strengthened by the emotional relations of the Game – resulting in complex and at times problematic outcomes. Therefore, more pronounced than in other organisational games, the nature of play in the Game enjoins a rather potent set of emotions in the processes and outcomes of the game. Unlike organisational games that seem to be driven by an incessant need to win or distraction from terrible working conditions, the Game in the creative work at Alpha solicits fairly potent affectual inputs and outcomes to work.

### ***Relations at Play***

Selves, as part of gameplay at Alpha, are bound in strong affectual relations with work. This is perhaps not surprising given that other scholars have already found that creative workers have a strong attachment to their work (Thompson et al., 2016). Affectual attachments to work are in danger of appearing, at least on the surface, as personally rewarding and meaningful ways of organising work – so that a love for one’s work for example, may be experienced as rewarding for the self. However, what I show here is that these affectual relations to work are more nuanced and at times more troubling for individuals than what we might expect on the surface.

The Game at Alpha demands the investment selves directly in gameplay and work. Recognition of selves in and through work by a number of significant others can work to affirm a self that is aligned with a desired subject position. Kenny (2010), in her review of Judith Butler’s work, explains how the self requires confirmation from others. This sociality of the self not only explains how desires are caught up in recognition of the subject so that ‘processes of desire are implicated in the very formation of the

subject' (p. 860) but also that identification of the subject, or lack thereof, can lead to various emotional responses. These emotional experiences often simultaneously 'involve both valuable recognition and painful abjection' (Kenny, 2010, p. 859). This social aspect of identification is introduced in Axel Honneth's (1995) book *The Struggle for Recognition*, where he theorises that experiences of self-esteem and self-worth are constructed through social relations. Honneth argues that recognition of the self by significant 'others' is not fixed and cannot be taken for granted but rather occurs in negotiations and struggles. If an individual is successful in attaining recognition from their significant others, this ultimately leads to experiences of self-realisation. In the opposite case, the lack of recognition can rupture experiences of esteem leading to negative feelings such as those of indignation or sorrow (Honneth, 1995). For example, when expectations and norms are not met in the judgements of others, feelings of disrespect are felt more intensely than if judgements are made by the individual and not the significant other. Such feelings of disrespect by an other inspire discomfort, unrest, denial or even resistance to the judgements (Honneth, 1995). Creative work already calls upon valuation of work to occur in communities who appreciate and value the work (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993). The entanglement of selves, in work and work evaluation can therefore explain why emotions are so salient in the accounts of workers at Alpha in relationship to their work. Having discussed some of the structural aspects of the Game, I will now venture into exploring the more micro experiences of playing the Game, and emotions surrounding these in order to place selves and emotions experienced in their 'wider structural and cultural contexts' (p. 13) in order to develop theory that is built on the interrelation between individuals, organisations, and the social (Fineman, 2000).

### **Self-love**

The management of affectual relations to work are not reliant simply on individuals but are managed and regulated by social systems and structures. The Game, which I have described here as one such social system implicates love in an ongoing relation to work – rather than a straightforward outcome. Workers at Alpha expressed feeling love towards work when their work was socially recognised and accepted by significant others (saying "wow nice stuff", feeling "warm and gooey", and work being "immensely satisfying" when it was appreciated by these others). Creative workers' intimate relationship to their work also has the opportunity of tightening the relation between self



and the experience of love. Ashforth (1998) draws this connection between love and identification by stating that if ‘one’s hopes expectations are fulfilled (and reciprocated?)’ (p. 215) it may lead to a deep attachment to the object of one’s identification. In the case of Alpha this identification of selves occurs in their relations to their work, which if affirmed can lead to an extended commitment to one’s work. As such, working towards the affirmation of identity can be an important source for personal meaning and motivation, even in work that is not directly pleasurable or offering extrinsic rewards (Shamir, 1991). Driver (2017) connects the meaningfulness of work to an imaginary self. These imaginary selves serve to attach experiences of self to work as they implore fantasies of work as a means of becoming complete (Driver, 2017). At Alpha, the ideal position of the autonomous, creative, and loving worker offers the discursive resources for constructing a preferred or ideal self that sets a target for one’s feelings of ‘completeness’ and ultimately meaning and love.

The motivation to find meaning in life (Frankl, 1963) as well as desires for self-actualisation and meaning in work are here largely dependent on and precariously pinned to the social affirmation of selves. Love for work may be experienced through flow or getting lost in “*the womb*” or “*bubble*” for periods at a time, but even these moments are constructed reflexively in terms of their ability to improve the relation between self and work – by being a means through which individuals work towards their aspirational identities. These processes inspire a commitment and dedication to the work, in the way that Kahn (1990) described the involvement of the self in work as a source of engagement – as he states ‘the combination of employing and expressing a person's preferred self yields behaviours that bring alive the relation of self to role’ (p. 700). This relation was strengthened when people felt their work as worthwhile providing a sense of meaningfulness. Conversely, the withdrawal or disengagement of selves occurs via activities that are not supportive of preferred selves culminating in ‘an evacuation or suppression of their expressive and energetic selves’ (Kahn, 1990, p. 701). Kahn (1990) also argues that these states are not permanent or fixed but largely dependent on fluid and fluctuating experiences of selves in role, echoing some of the more recent literature emphasizing the temporality of experiences of meaningfulness in work (Bailey and Madden, 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). In this way, as I have already argued, love is not a fixed state but rather an ongoing project dependent on socio-political conditions as well as the relation of self to work and the ability to work on selves with the potential to realise ideal or desired selves.

### Self-insecurity

Given the contested nature of creative work, selves do not stay in a permanent state of love and meaning. As Honneth (1995) argues - valuations by significant others that are inconsistent with expectations of an individual can bring about a host of painful experiences of the self and not least of all increase self-insecurities. These moments of negative responses to work can rupture experiences of love for work and become replaced by emotions that may threaten individuals' well-being. At Alpha we saw this reflected in experiences that individuals framed as "*painful*", "*frustrating*", making them "*upset*", feeling "*bad*", "*struggling*" and that it "*really hurts*". We can understand these experiences given that the construction of selves is not stable but rather dynamic and complex and an ongoing project to 'claim, accept, negotiate, affirm, stabilise, maintain, reproduce, challenge, disrupt, destabilise, [or] repair' selves (Schultz, Maguire, Langley, and Tsoukas, 2012, p. 3). Individuals also continue to work on these projects of the self in order to develop positive affective outcomes (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010), such as love. When these expectations and feelings are not met through their attempts to navigate the Game this can result in rather difficult feelings - such as those described above. The difficulty is furthered by a sense that 'you're only ever as good as your last presentation — of self, that is' (Clegg, 2005, p. 535) as we saw with Gordon who states that even when "*people love that*", one week later he had forgotten about it and needed a new source of affirmation of his aspired-to-identity. These ongoing struggles with the self based on the outcomes of negotiated power relations produce an anxiety and insecurity (Collinson, 2003) which may threaten the well-being of individuals. In addition to the threat on their well-being, the outcomes of these ongoing struggles may affect worker's life course, with those not living up to the ideal not being asked to join the organisations but also those continuously feeling bad leaving – recall Gordon stating he would leave the organisation had he not received the recognition he craved. The entanglement of affect, then, meant that the Game is anything other than 'experimental play' that is 'just for fun' (Ashforth, 1998; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010) but rather having serious implications for the lives of individuals.

While the majority of experiences had not reached the stage of employee exit – there was a great deal of ambivalence experienced resulting from the Game. This may be because 'many emotional experiences will be fleeting, inchoate, even confused' (Fineman, 2000, p. 13) but it may also result from the instability of most social relations

which are more often untidy and ambiguous. Complicating the ambivalence experienced by workers is the strong coupling of selves to work in creative work experienced by those at Alpha. In the case where there may be a looser coupling of selves to work we can imagine that cynical distancing or even disengagement of selves may be easier to navigate and more frequently observable. Rather than producing cynical distancing this ambivalence can result in a stronger tethering of selves to work (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). Discourses of autonomy and ownership position responsibility for work and work valuations on the individuals creating a self-disciplining subject who is determined to succeed and produced socially valued work. Layton who experienced a scrapping of his earlier project as “*very very very painful*” goes on to narratively construct himself as an influential creator which makes him “*very happy*”. My intention here is not to imply that these micro-movements between aspects of experience are necessarily problematic or even uncommon to other types of work. Instead what these loving, painful and ambivalent experiences provide is a view of the structural dimensions that call upon selves and emotions to be experienced and (re-)invested tightly and saliently in and through work.

### **Self-consciousness**

This tight coupling of selves to work has two implications. Firstly, I suggest that this increases the salience of selves so that individuals, in reflexive moments, are more inclined to experience and consider their selves (especially in relation to their work) over other matters, for example concern for others, conditions of work and life, or even trivialities. This implies a heightened awareness of the self which I consider a persistence of self (in comparison to, for example, an other). Secondly the social structures that are formed from the Game, serve to weaken desires to distance selves from work – even when outcomes are less favourable or emotionally difficult or painful.

To explore the former point first, the social nature of the game means that it is set up with a necessity for surveillancing of work and selves. This surveillancing that occurs in the platforms where valuation of work (and selves) takes place encourages a (self-)disciplining of selves but also makes ‘individuals increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects, under the gaze of those in authority’ (Collinson, 2003, p. 538). This activity encourages conscious attempts at managing and monitoring selves and work outcomes – recall Gordon’s inordinate “*need*” for something new with which others could identify him even if one week ago people had liked his work. This need to

manage and monitor selves has an implication that selves are part of everyday work experiences. Where in other kinds of work distancing of selves and identity may be relatively easy or a part of identity navigation for example bankers (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016), the demands on creative workers at Alpha may make it comparatively more difficult to distance a self from work.

If we examine studies of selves in organisations so far we see how selves commit to and resist organisationally inspired discourses and cultures. In Casey's (1995) study of Hephaestus corporation, individuals resist the corporate colonization of selves through strategies of defense, collusion, and capitulation which go with or against colonization attempts depending on benefits for the self of each strategy. Nonetheless, each of these strategies saw the individuals as instrumental in managing the self's relation to the organisational culture and exercising the ability to draw the boundaries between the self and the demands of Hephaestus' culture. In Kunda's (1992) study of a high-tech corporation we saw how individuals embraced but also distanced themselves from organisational prescribed selves also through self-management. While individuals were 'bound by ties of belief, strong emotions, and even religious fervour' (p. 177), they were still able to exercise emotional and cognitive distancing from the demands of organisational selves. Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants explains how, coupled with their flight attendant duties, workers were required to carry out emotional labour. This demanded that they carefully managed their emotions and themselves when dealing with customers. While Delta Airlines sought to capture an 'authenticity' or a 'soul' of the individuals because these would provide better performances in service work, workers instead experienced a withdrawal of the self from the performance, leaving behind an emotional display that has all the markers of a good performance but reflexively constructing themselves outside of this process (Hochschild, 1983). The three examples discussed so far illustrate how selves are called upon in organisational processes and outcomes. Yet in each case selves and their boundaries with work, culture, and organisation have been managed by individuals so as to maintain boundaries. Even in the case of any collapses of these boundaries these have been mostly temporary (in the case of Kunda's work). However, in the case of Alpha, while several articulated threats at withdrawing selves, I observed very few attempts to manage and/or distance selves from work. At times the boundaries between self and work became so collapsed that work became a part of one's identification - recall these statements from the previous chapters:

This is a piece of me right there.

*Eddie*

It's very much you, you're putting yourself out there.

*Arthur*

The whole creative package is me on a plate . . it's me . . everything that you see here . . it pours . . it's me . . that's me. I could be upset to the core of me, because *it is* the core of me.

*Gordon*

Different contexts that I find I struggle . . one is like I said I deliver my creativity to somebody else and they do something with my creativity. If that person doesn't take care of the work that I provide them then it becomes difficult to hand your baby over to them.

*Kyle*

And I had put a lot of myself into it and then it took a while to readjust.

*Layton*

When it's creative work you need to be very sensitive and give a part of yourself.

*Lara*

### **Making sense of selves**

While there were some clear expressions of criticism in the accounts of individuals towards the changes that had occurred in the organisation, I observed very little cynicism. This criticism was predominantly directed at the growing depersonalisation of the organisation where you “*are not considered as a creative human being*” and where the Studio Head could no longer remember everyone's names. Other criticisms were directed towards the organisation of work – routinisation, bad planning, and lack of space for creativity. Rather than providing a source for distancing of selves to work, these criticisms target the limits of the Game. Individuals' complaints were mostly about company changes that affected their ability to be seen and valued in their creative work. As numbers grew space for platforms and with it opportunities for being seen became more scarce – increasing competition for positions. Routinisation of work meant that individuals' ability to play the autonomous, creative, and loving worker was under threat.

While at least one worker spoke of his desire for exit from the organisation, and another spoke of becoming “*detached emotionally*” and despite Lara claiming that after

painful experiences people got distant and decided not to put themselves in to their work, what I observed was quite the opposite. Even those that had experienced painful experiences in the past seemed to continue to construct themselves in line with the autonomous, creative, and loving identity demanded at Alpha. What I observed is a very tight performance and adherence to the aspirational identity with very little waning, in particular from the expressions of love for one's work. Therefore, to make sense of the increased consciousness of the self and decreased self-management or distancing activity might have occurred we can perhaps look closer at the affectual demands on the workers and its implication.

Feelings of love demand a collapse of the self and the boundaries of the object of love. For Bauman (2001) love means 'signing a blank cheque' (p. 168) which demands tolerance, acceptance and 'casting of the self and of the Other, as a specific modality of the Other's presence' (p. 169). Tolerance and acceptance imply a commitment to the object of love even in the face of adversities. Even if reason may seek to return the boundaries between the self and the object of love, in moments, it may cardinally frame these in relation to that very object. The power in this affectual relation may work to relinquish reason so work becomes an end in itself. Unlike autonomy and creativity which may encourage a breaking away with convention and behaving in ways that may go in a number of different directions, love encourages a commitment and duty to the object of love, work, which can explain the tighter tethering of selves to work in creative work.

This love for one's work does not surmount to several idiosyncratic moments but spans multiple texts and individuals and is a broadly shared experience at Alpha. This is most likely due to the loving subject being constructed and disciplined by the dominant organisational discourses regarding an ideal worker. While the aspirational identity relating to the Game may well change and be complicated by variations of the ideals, love remains consistently drawn upon in the experiences and constructions of work. I have argued here that this affectual commitment to work is part of the structural demands on individuals. Love and the pursuit of it, as it is constructed here, motivates an ongoing commitment to re-invest the self in work but also overlook or rationalise away the somewhat painful experiences resulting from work that may be harmful to individuals and their lives. This begs the question about the interests that the Game, and this affectual commitment to it, avail.

## *Summary*

Revisiting the Game, this chapter expands on the observations of the previous three chapters and theorises the dimensions of the Game and its outcomes. The Game with the Self in the creative work at Alpha is one where the self is drawn directly into the processes and outcomes of work. This occurs through the allure of an aspirational identity which is reinforced by dominant societal and organisational discourses governing the ideals of the creative worker. At Alpha this creative worker is one that is autonomous, creative, and loves one's work. Desires to be affirmed in the position of ideal worker are contested, with few rather than many being able to be positioned as the great artist. While success in having work and selves recognised by significant others leads to temporal feelings of love, such moments are punctuated by the experiences of pain and anxiety of failing to do so. Rather than decoupling selves from work through self-management and self-distancing, at Alpha we see how this may lead to an even tighter coupling of selves to work which draws affect in as a central part of creative work. Such demands reflect other observations of the complication of affect in creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Kline et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2016). The navigation, and possible implications, of such experiences at Alpha connect to the broader writings on the harnessing of subjectivity as a part of work and production – which by many accounts is problematic (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fleming, 2014; Hanlon, 2017).

## 9. Return of the Craftsman?

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The previous chapter introduced several dimensions and implications of the Game with the Self in more depth, this chapter aims to take this further by critically exploring the roots of the affectual demands of the Game in organisations and creative work. The appeal for emotion work involved in navigating creative work at Alpha and the implication of love for work as part of production is theoretically examined. The difficult emotion work used to navigate the Game built around the aspirational identity of a ‘great artist’ is introduced as a catalyst for a micro-resistance to this aspect of the Game. Seeking to change but not entirely radicalise the ideal creative worker at Alpha, workers drew on the alternative discourse of craft and the craftsman in order to help them navigate their work. In doing so, I argue that they maintain the qualities of the ideal worker - autonomy, creativity, and love for one’s work; while attempting to make valuations of their work more objective. The discourse and identity of the craftsman does this by shifting a focus from aesthetics to function and from the mysterious qualities of the artist to the clear and articulable skills of a craftsman. This pivot allows workers to cope with the emotional challenges of having work and selves not valued in desirable ways by returning self-management to the individuals and reducing the subjective power of significant others over their work. Ultimately, however, the question remains whether there is any escape from the Game or if this shift simply continues to serve organisational interests and the demands imposed on workers by the Game. The appeal of craftsmanship in creative work and other fields for worker well-being is acknowledged by other authors (cf. Hodson, 2001; Luckman, 2015), but the question remains if a return to earlier ideologies of work serve individuals or are yet another means through which subjectivity continues to be harnessed as a part of creative production.

### *Situating the Game*

Developing our understandings of the experience of selves and emotions at Alpha through a theoretical lens requires situating the Game and its implications within a range of broader theoretical streams and ideas. More specifically, exploring the emotionally charged experiences recounted at Alpha encourages a situating of the socio-political Game within the existing research on selves and emotions in organisations. The turn to aspects of ‘identity’ and ‘affect’, but also managerial control, in organisations over the



last several decades in organisational research allow us to explore the theoretical possibilities for situating the Game amongst the extant organisational literature.

The first such possibility of theorisation is to interpret the Game as resulting in positive emotions that promote the experience dignity and the wellbeing of workers (Hodson, 2001). In this regard we could see creative work at Alpha as a source of meaningful and rewarding experiences for individuals. It has been argued that creativity and self-expression in work are ways to fill work with meaning and purpose while avoiding experiences of alienation or self-estrangement of the modern worker (Blauner, 1964). To this end we might look at expressions of love for one's work as a signifier for meaningfulness of work, but also for the possibilities of realising one's desires (Driver, 2017). However, to say that creativity and self-expression are enough to produce wellbeing, happiness and meaning from work would clearly do the experiences of creative workers at Alpha an injustice. From what we observed, selves and emotions experienced resulting from creative work done through the Game led down a much more convoluted and slippery path - often moving between loving experiences and more difficult and painful ones. To privilege, therefore, the positive emotions experienced and neglect darker experiences of creative work would be a rather shallow and uncritical stance afforded by a predominant focus on positivity (Fineman, 2006).

Rather, exploring these experiences in more depth we can observe how the alignment of management interests and individuals' interests might be interpreted as an exercise of managerial control (Bojesen and Muhr, 2008; Michaelson, 2005). This reflects views that illustrate a general softening of methods of organisational control – from the once coercive and commanding means of control, described by Weber's 'iron cage', to softer means interested in capturing worker commitment to managerial initiatives (Heelas, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Thrift, 2005; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). This means that while workers may experience feelings of self-actualisation and self-realisation from playing the Game (which may also result in the well-being and happiness of the worker), these feelings may ultimately serve to obscure power imbalances and make workers 'complicit in their own subjugation' (Fineman, 2006, p. 282). To this end, organisations such as Alpha have an interest in promoting discourses that align the worker with the objectives of the organisation (Du Gay, 1996) and in turn promote structural configurations – such as the Game. This promotion of discourses which align workers to objectives serves Alpha two-fold - to increase worker commitment to the organisation and to control and (self-)regulate worker production. In

this way Alpha is able to capture ‘the individual striving from meaning in work, seeking identity in work, whose subjective desires for self-actualisation are to be harnessed to the firm’s aspirations for productivity, efficiency and the like’ (Rose, 1999, p. 244). These desires are captured precisely because by playing the game individuals hope to ‘become enterprising, take control of [their] careers, transform [themselves] into high fliers, achieve excellence, and fulfil [themselves] not *in spite of* work but *by means of* work’ (Rose, 1998, p.158, author's emphasis). In support of Rose’s points, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe how this occurs through the use managerially inspired discourses which aim to align individual desires with organisational interests through the ‘self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses about work and organisation with which they may become more or less identified and committed’ (p. 620). In this way discourses of the ideal subject and responses to work, such as ‘love’ and loving one’s work, are produced and reproduced by desires for a wholeness of the individual, while being harnessed by organisations for their own interests (Bojesen and Muhr, 2008).

Organisations harness the outcomes of such activity by privileging social mechanisms, such as the Game, that invoke an engagement of selves and other affectual relations to one’s work and through attempts to mobilise and manage such subjectivities (Flecker and Hofbauer, 1998; Hanlon, 2017). It must be noted here that this interest in capturing the ‘wholeness’ of the individual is not an entirely recent phenomenon but traces back to early humanist scholars’ (for example Maslow and McGregor) attempts to incorporate the individual’s self-desires in creating the ‘self-disciplined capitalist subject’ (Hanlon, 2017). In current post-Fordist times however, these attempts to modulate subjectivity are especially visible in digital technologies and immaterial labour (Berardi, 2009). In Bifo Berardi’s (2009) *The Soul at Work* Berardi argues that it was precisely digital technologies that have enabled intellectual labour to be subjected into the ‘value production cycle’ (p. 29). Creative work of video game designers as part of this immaterial labour, which is defined by Hardt and Negri (2000) as that which is focused on language, communication and the symbolic as modes of production, is thus a key foothold for where such capitalistic subjugation can be discerned. Digital production of video games then holds a specific and strategic position in ‘affectively shaping subjectivities’ as part of a more global system of capitalism (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009, p. xxiii).

### **Selves, emotions, and control at Alpha**

Returning to the modulation of selves and affect in organisations and at Alpha, we see how the competitive nature of the Game can accentuate feelings of insecurity, anxiety and ambivalence. There is an over-surplus of producers who desire to be recognised in the ideal identity. Increased competition between players means that positions are only momentarily filled as new aspirant players soon work to displace those in previously favourable positions. The fact that the ideal of perfect and pure competition are never fulfilled (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) further stresses the struggles for positions and produces experiences of rejection by significant others. This competitive nature coupled with responsibility for outcomes of the game being individualised (over an organisational or collective phenomenon) increases the likelihood of painful emotional experiences. In addition, the heightened call for surveillance and disciplining of selves due to the subjective nature of work valuation only increases the salience of selves. I argue that this increased salience of selves in everyday work experiences amplifies emotionality in relation to work. Failing to cease the rollercoaster of emotions, love and meaningfulness collide with feelings of pain and insecurity as selves are continuously called into question.

Getting caught up in the flux of emotions of creative work may once again serve organisational interests in two ways: 1) by serving as a distraction from less favourable conditions of work, and 2) by dampening desires to distance selves from work. Workers' desire for their ideals may make them blind to their current less than ideal conditions of work – leaving them sanguinely fixed on an imaginary future state where their ideal selves may be realised or nostalgically reflecting on the past in moments where such selves were temporarily realised. This temporal focus on the future or the past serves as a distraction from the present - where conditions, selves and feelings faced by the workers may be less than ideal. One example of this is Alice, who in her narratives iterated the anger she felt at the mundaneness of her current tasks and her inability to “*put something creative into something*” but nostalgically recalled how in the past was able to have fun and be silly, while also being recognised as the “*creative one*”. The construction of these positive experiences serve as distractions and reminders of the potentiality of work - which encourages workers to overlook existing conditions and even sustain the commitment and energy they invest into their work despite currently experiencing less favourable conditions. These kinds of feelings echo the argument of Fleming and Sturdy (2010) where calls to ‘be yourself’ at a call centre served to distract

workers from harsh effects of conventional controls while also attempting to capture the ‘sociality of workers so that more ‘authentic’ emotional labour performances can be secured’ (p. 190).

In the case of Alpha, workers were able to go further than simply being distracted from controls and less favourable conditions – they were also able to mobilise the discourses of the idealised subject as a means for rationalising away these less favourable conditions and outcomes such as lower pay, working long hours, as well as stresses and pressures. Some examples of this include Ray - who had no summer vacation but that it was part of a “*fun and rewarding*” chance to do something amazing and having your work realised; or Fisher who worked the most hours out of anyone and felt panic and fear around deadlines but stated that this was all worth it because he was working very hard towards realising his dream role. Aspirational identities in creative work, then, mask or normalise unfavourable conditions of work, encourage a rationalisation of these conditions, and motivate a retaliation against threats to working towards these identities (Ahuja, Heizmann, and Clegg, Forthcoming). However, unlike in Ahuja, Heizmann and Clegg’s (Forthcoming) study of early career architects where they exhibited a ‘dejected emotional stance’ when they experienced discrepancies between ideals and everyday experiences, at Alpha there was a persistence to constructing autonomous, creative, and loving selves through work – reflecting the tight coupling of selves and lack of cognitive distancing resulting from the Game.

Encouraging identification with one’s work is then part of broader mechanisms of control that are driven by individuals’ pursuits for positive experiences (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014). To this end, others have also noted how emotions such as love and desire can be regulated by organisations to entice a commitment one’s work and organisation (Andersen and Born, 2007, 2008; Bojesen and Muhr, 2008). The rhetorics of love are deployed to show a level of care for an employee’s well-being while simultaneously exposing ‘more of an employees’ self to the organization’ (Bojesen and Muhr, 2008, p. 81) as well as imbuing work with intimacy (Andersen and Born, 2007; Bojesen and Muhr, 2008; Gregg, 2011). But love is much more than a feel-good phenomenon. Love is a fragile and temporal emotion, which may in fact be violent and destructive. Bojesen and Muhr (2008) argue this by stating that ‘rapture might lead to rupture’ (p. 87) where in the absence of love, and moments of desire, there is disorder. Feelings of love are thus punctuated by more challenging and difficult emotions such as

pain and insecurity – ultimately resulting in inconsistencies and an increased amount of ambivalence towards work and self.

The joy experienced from temporary triumphs are not enough to avoid ambivalence, frustration as well as insecurity and anxieties about one's position (Bauman, 2001). These fluctuations between the highs and lows are similar to those ambivalent feelings expressed by workers in Rowland and Handy's (2012) study of film production in New Zealand. Workers were 'totally consumed' by their work when they experienced the creative highs but also struggled with the lows – often feeling drained. Their relation to their work became addictive to the point that they struggled to sever this relation even when they recognised that it could be an unhealthy one (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). The workers at Alpha similarly struggle to draw the boundaries between selves and work or distance themselves, despite reporting painful and difficult periods – they continued to express a 'love' for their work. The incorporation of affect as part of the processes of production, as input and outcome of the Game, results in various troubling outcomes for individuals which may jeopardise their own well-being.

Yet the Game continues to serve organisational interests by encouraging a disciplining workers as autonomous, creative, and loving - ultimately increasing workers' commitment to the organisation and destabilising their resistance to unfavourable conditions (working long hours, taking lower pay). Thus we see how the cultivation of affect in video game development becomes an essential part of production, where the experience of pleasure from work masks repetitive and unglamorous tasks and works to develop a 'mystified exploitation' of the game development worker (Kline et al., 2003). Such experiences at Alpha also show successful digital media companies 'depend on harnessing a bona fide enthusiasm for game creation', what Kline, Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter call a 'digital labour of love' (p. 200). As Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter put it 'game making blurs the lines between work and play, production and consumption, voluntary activity and precarious exploitation, in a way that typifies the boundless exercise of biopower' (2009, p. xxix). In examining this blurring it becomes evident that love itself is entangled in capitalist ideologies that complicate our lives in the means of production. Fleming (2014) argues, there has been a 'highly instrumental capitalist return to "the social"' (p.17), one that is visible in attempts to harness aspects of life as a part of the corporate agenda. This sort of 'soft capitalism' is vitally aware of the increasing importance of subjectivity, self and the political game for recognition that accompany it (Thrift, 2005). The capitalistic interest in profit therefore motivates

organisational moves to encourage the collapsing of self to work, but also to encourage the structures that increase profits – such as those that allow worker (self-)exploitation and subjugation (long working hours, low pay, standardisation of work). Arguably then the Game, in its current form, does not satisfy the dual interests of the organisation and the individuals in a dignified and balanced way but continues to represent asymmetrical relations of power that mobilise affect in the subjugation of workers.

### ***The Changing Game***

In theorising the Game further the question arises regarding the boundaries of the Game and how these may change. Foucauldian theory would have us look at the Game as relations of power where certain ways of being, selves, emotions are constituted, so that changes in any of these is understood as changes in the configurations of power (David Knights and Willmott, 1989; Mansfield, 2000; Vince, 2001). These configurations, or social systems, are affected by social relations which are interdependent but also based on the ‘possession and distribution of scarce resources’ (Knights and Willmott, 1985, p. 25). In the case of the Game these scarce resources are the desirable and aspired-to-identities that are currently predominantly linked to the artist. Since the identity of the artist is a position that is elusive and competitive it is affirmable through significant others’ valuations in the available social platforms. It is through these platforms, where work and its signature of the self is presented to a respective audience of significant others, that recognition from others can help realise the desired self. It is possible that selves are constructed in the absence of these platforms or in other spaces – but in the case of Alpha these platforms for presenting the self as part of work help facilitate gameplay and the micro-politics of self-making.

From this perspective it is the power laden discourses that dictate who or what can be judged in these settings as acting within ideals such as those of the ‘artist’ or simply even as simply ‘creative’, but also ‘loving’, and ‘autonomous’. Yet to award discourses a largely deterministic function would go against the ideas and interests in individuals and their capacity to ‘navigate’ their worlds. While this thesis has so far courted both sides of the dualism between structure and action, it does so in a way that attempts to explore the interaction between both and not privilege any side but ‘take social practices as the focus of analysis, and to explore how these practices are simultaneously mediated by subjectivity and by relations of power’ (Knights and Willmott, 1989, p. 536). It is in these social practices that individuals are able to exert

choice, agency, and resistance to existing relations of power. The Game is an attempt to control and regulate the kinds of selves and behaviours that are ideal at Alpha as an organisational setting. The alignment of individual and organisational interests strengthens the Game's power and ensures that game players keep playing – which I have argued in the previous section ultimately serves the interests of management and more clearly capital. However, by demanding affect (such as love) workers also experience love's darker or violent side. This coupled with the competition for elusive and scarce desired identities produce the insecurities and ambivalence experienced by workers.

### **Coping attempts**

The experiencing of painful emotions motivates workers to seek ways in which to reduce or cope with these feelings. Some examples of this can be traced back to the studies of Kunda, Casey and Hochschild introduced in chapter three. In their studies we saw how attempts at appropriating selves into the organisation, culture, or work were resisted through active self-management – either through attempts at distancing selves or producing sufficient boundaries between self, organisation and work (Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992). In Hochschild's (1993) case these boundaries were established on the basis of perceived differences between 'authentic' and 'false' selves, where 'false' selves were involved in emotional performances of selves at work and 'authentic' selves were kept outside of the realms of work. While this thesis does not make such real-fake self dichotomies, the attempts to manage and draw boundaries of the self through various means can be understood as attempts to resist regimes of power which attempt to regulate selves and/or collapse experiences of self into those of organisations and work. Yet such resistance is not always a clear kick back to management but often occurs in more subtle ways that need to move beyond the dialectic of control versus resistance and show resistance as a 'constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses' which occurs when individuals reflect on themselves and grapple with tensions and contradictions, and in doing so 'pervert and subtly shift meanings and understandings' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 687). Exploring such episodes of micro-resistance can do more than reveal how individuals work to cope with difficult emotions – it can also reveal the more creative aspects of the interaction between power and agency that end up reshaping existing discourses and identities.

More specifically studies of the practices of micro-resistance have revealed that this occurs in various ways and that these are neither entirely determined by the existing discourse nor executed in clear and straightforward ways by highly rational actors (Collinson, 1994; Kondo, 1990; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Instead this resistance occurs in complex and ambiguous ways in which individuals make sense of tensions and contradictions between themselves and their preferred selves and identities as they explore alternative ways of being (Thomas and Davies, 2005). This follows a very Foucauldian interest in the micro-practices of resistance, where resistance is not necessarily conceptualised as a 'revolution' but nonetheless creates 'alternative identities and discursive systems of representation within the context of broader flows of domination' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007, p. 43). These ways of 'making do' in everyday life act against what those in authority desire (Courpasson, 2017; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). In the case of Alpha it is the dominant discourses that emerge from the broader creative worker discourses and images – that is of the creative genius or great artist who has an innate but mystical skill or quality that allows them to position themselves in desirable elite identity positions vis-à-vis other creative workers.

At Alpha, rather than perpetuating only the dominant discourses and fantasies of the artist, I observed how these dominant discourses were rather adapted, subverted and re-inscribed so as to subtly shift meanings and understandings and to cope with contradictions and tensions experienced (Thomas and Davies, 2005). This puts identity as a source of resistance to the ideals provided by discourses (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Thereby producing a role for the individual in relation to these subjectivities generated from the structural configurations such as discourses. Discourses, from which idealised and aspirational identities develop, are not fixed but rather constantly in tension with other possible alternative discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mumby, 1988). Alternative discourses work to challenge dominant ones by offering other imaginaries for constructing and experiencing selves. Therefore, discourses-as-structures cannot suture specific experiences of the self, rather we observe individuals' navigation and experiences of these as often messy and imperfect in their production and understanding of these in their talk and practice (Broadfoot et al., 2004). Articulatory moments can reveal tensions and contradictions between different discourses and identities which are not always neatly presented but often overlap and merge in ways that serve the interests of the individual. In this way individuals strategically 'exploit the variety of sometimes



overlapping, sometimes conflicting, discourses and subjectivities in order to craft a self which is, to an extent, ‘their own’ (Watson, 2008, p. 130).

One such way is the attempts to position themselves in accordance with their fantasies of the artist. They construct themselves as unique or possessing unique qualities that make them ‘special’ or ‘different’, portraying themselves and their work in ways as distinctive vis-à-vis others. The organisation encourages these perspectives by promoting the ‘imaginative skill’ required to do creative work at Alpha in their corporate materials. In this way valuing qualities that may be difficult to train such as ‘imagination’, over more functional and technical skillsets that individuals can develop through concrete training methods. And the individuals respond to that by appropriating this discourse as part of their self understandings – recall Isaac’s insistence that creativity is something “*you just have*” that “*isn’t based on expertise*” or how long you have worked at Alpha but based on who he was – “*based on me*”. Other creative workers further this idea when they construct each other as “*celebrities*” or themselves as having a “*special way of thinking*”. This discourse of the great creative individual is what motivates interest in playing the Game as well what bids selves to work in a collapsed way – which is further maintained by affectual demands to feel a love or commitment to one’s work. Yet when attempts at affirming this identity are not realised by significant others the tension and contradiction between desired identities and realised ones inspire a great deal of emotion work. This is also the case when loving and committed acts are rejected by others or ‘scrapped’ resulting in experiences that are “*very very very painful*”. These challenging moments motivate the search for alternative discourses and identities as way of coping with the insecurity and distress caused by playing the Game with the aspirational identity of the ‘great artist’.

Enter the craftsman. What we know so far is that the identity and discourse of this artist is desirable, but difficult if not impossible to sustain. It also inspires strong competition amongst those wishing to be recognised as artists or ‘creative geniuses’ – competition for these positions can be fierce with one worker constructing the creative genius as one of 10-15 in the world. Alternatively, the craftsman identity offers many of the benefits of the artist but allows individuals to cope with and escape some of the ill feelings of having their work cut or rejected. In the next section I will speak about some of the ways in which the craftsman is constructed by individuals and how this has offered an alternative understanding of selves which maintains some of the desirable ideals and outcomes of the Game while alleviating some of the more challenging experiences.

These practices attempt to develop an alternative aspirational identity to which workers can orientate their self-projects – played out in the Game. Since these practices were observed across a significant number of individuals it is possible to theorise the discourse of the craftsman as a growing discourse within Alpha seeking to challenge the dominance of the artist aspirational identity. In exploring the manoeuvres and shifts between these varied discourses and identities in the social and textual practices of workers we can understand how creative workers attempt to navigate their sometimes challenging work experiences of selves and emotions in the creative organisation.

### ***The Craft Alternative***

Prior to industrialisation of production much labour could be seen as ‘craft labour’ as the work of artisans and craftspeople fed pre-industrial economies where many products were ‘hand-made’ rather than ‘machine-made’ (Lucie-Smith, 1981; Luckman, 2012). With the development of industrialisation came a growing awareness of the dwindling of craftwork and craft labour as workers were continually replaced with machines that were able to produce products faster and at a lower cost (Lucie-Smith, 1981). As a growing resistance to this displacement and de-skilling of workers a movement emerged across British and American creative circles determined to maintain the craftsman’s role in society (Banks, 2010; Lucie-Smith, 1981). The activities around this resistance, known more commonly as the Arts and Crafts Movement, made a resounding noise regarding craftwork and its social status (Lucie-Smith, 1981; Luckman, 2015). The juxtaposition of craft against industrial labour developed a growing narrative of the craftworker versus the machine labourer – a positioning that maintained itself for many decades following the early initiatives (Banks, 2010; Huws, 2006; Lucie-Smith, 1981). The discourse around craftsmanship is one that has seen a revival around the craft ideal – particularly from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the crafted and personalised seeks to challenge the mass-produced and where the relation between maker and her product becomes central to work and craft production (Luckman, 2015).

In chapter three I introduced the image of the craftsman, which was based on the working conception of the creative worker framed around the discourse of craftsmanship. Following the earlier developments of the Arts and Crafts Movement, scholars in the 60s and 70s built on this discourse by positioning the craftsman as the ‘ideal worker’. In his development on Marx’s earlier ideas on alienation of the industrial worker Blauner (1964) explored the conditions and experiences of industrial workers in

the 50s and 60s and their relations to technology and social structure. Across various industrial realities he settled on the work of the craftsman printer as the kind that could overcome much domination, isolation and discontent found in these industrial settings. Control of work and self-expression were particularly important for mitigating against the alienation and the monotony of standardised and assembly line work (Blauner, 1964). Mills (1956) too saw craftsmanship as a source of work gratification where the craftsman feels 'his work and will as powerfully victorious over the recalcitrance of materials and the malice of things' (p. 221). It is this relation between producer and product that is the source of pleasure from work and one which offers dignity and pride in one's work in the processes of making things that are considered valuable (Anthony, 1977). Such promise of pleasure, dignity and pride from work as well as alleviating the threat of alienation made conditions particularly favourable for furthering the appeal of the image of craftsman as one who retains control of work, while at the same time imbuing it with personal meaning and delight against the harsh backdrop of standardised and meaningless work.

### **The artist versus the craftsman**

The artist is also involved in this process of 'making things', similarly to the craftsman - yet how do we distinguish these two identities of the creative worker from the other. According to Becker (1982) craft exists beyond the artworlds he describes in his book – where craft is focused on producing useful objects, placing emphasis on the functional over the aesthetic. This is not to say that craftwork is conducted entirely without aesthetics but that these are rather less emphasised compared to that of the artist who may be solely interested in producing things of beauty (Becker, 1982). Craftwork is also that which involves knowledge and skills for which there may be organised evaluative standards and therefore are not 'mysterious' or 'imaginative' but may be concrete and observable. Perhaps the biggest difference between being an artist and a craftsman can be understood as how one derives a meaning from work. The artist is reliant on a valuation of their work from others – who are the primary source for determining their work's (and in turn the artists') worth (Becker, 1982; Caves, 2000). While craftsmen also rely on some affirmation from others – this may be less so as they have established standards and functional criteria to meet. These standards may be more clearly offered by the social structures or it may be that the quality of the work demanded is made clear by the development and training offered by the particular field of craftsmanship. This

makes it possible to be less reliant on significant others for the valuation of work and rather gauge work against articulable standards or more objective functional requirements (Becker, 1982). These kinds of standards are also descriptive of the skills required and can clarify development paths for skillsets and offer ways to improve the quality of work. Artists, on the other hand, due to the rather varied and vastly more subjective nature of their works, may find it difficult to standardise let alone make communicable the ‘imaginative’ skills or secrets to their ‘genius’ or successes. The artist who just ‘has’ these skills makes it more difficult to transfer or communicate what these are – but simultaneously stands to gain the most if these are successful in providing a source of distinction for them since they are replicated by others with more difficulty and which requires more than a trainable and steadfast skillset.

While these differences between the artist and the craftsman are far from stable, and remain rather fluid across discourses and definition, it becomes necessary to attempt to make some distinctions between the two identities. Historically this has been done with some difficulty and lack of precision. Doing much to bring artworlds and the work of creative workers into view, Becker (1982) complicates this by distinguishing images of the artist, craftsman and the hybrid ‘artist-craftsman’ – with the latter being distinct from the former by a level of what he calls ‘higher ambition’. Even Mills speaks of craftsmen’s work as a ‘poem in action’ referring to both artists and craftsmen interchangeably in his description of the ideal worker. It becomes clear that Mills seems to discuss a more general conception of an autonomous creative worker in his writing on craft rather than delve deeper into specific distinctions of this worker as I have done here. This distinction of different images around this ‘autonomous creative worker’ is possible through examining some of the characteristics brought out in the discourses of each sub-type. In the table on the following page I highlight some of the differences and similarities that I have theorised across the two creative worker archetypes.

*Table 1. Comparison of differences and similarities of the artist vs craftsman identities*

	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Craftsman</b>
Primary focus on aesthetics	x	
Primary focus on functionality		x
Value of work subjectively determined	x	
Value of work more objectifiable through functionality		x
Ability to train and develop skills		x
Allow for self-expression	x	x
Autonomy and control of one's work	x	x
Demand love and commitment	x	x
Sacrifices as part of work	x	x

Of the similarities, both art and craft allow for the investment of the self in one's work – or self-expression (Becker, 1982). While this is a dominant distinguishing feature of both art and craft (compared to other types of work) the degree to which a worker may invest or imprint a self into their work may vary from worker to worker and task to task. Both archetypes also maintain a sense of autonomy and control over one's work. The worker themselves has the ability to decide how work is to be carried out and completed rather than following standardised procedures and methods (Mills, 1956). While the skills of the craftsman may be more readily standardised, the craftsman retains decision making on which skills to execute when and how to combine skills to produce their particular product. Art and craft both also demand a love and commitment to one's work, - to complete work as an act of love but also accept that the meaning derived from art or craftwork comes with sacrifices. The craftsman of Mills' writing is one who is dedicated to his work so much so that it blurs into his life – that 'he brings to his non-working hours the values and qualities developed and employed in his working time' he writes – work and leisure are seamless and work is the 'mainspring of the only life he knows' (p. 223).

Displaying such commitment and love for one's work is consistent with the demands at Alpha for a loving and committed worker. As such, both identities offer the opportunity to perform in the role of the 'ideal worker' at Alpha. During my time at Alpha it seemed that the Game is predominantly set up for workers to aspire to the identity of the artist. However, as I discovered in my talk with a significant number of the individuals – the craftsperson identity emerged as one alternative that challenged this aspirational identity of the artist and attempted to shift the idealised subject position to be that of a craftsman. Several expressed a rather strong resistance to 'art' or being

‘artists’. Adam resisted clearly in his dis-identification as an artist “*we are not artists, we are craftsmen*”, for him being a craftsman was producing the functional and that which sits within a ‘context’. The desire to contextualise his work also means that expectations and ways for valuing his work are made more transparent – for example that it fulfils the functional demands of users. John agrees and also compares his craftwork at Alpha to sharing his art in his leisure time where the “*judges are worse*” since their choices may be more arbitrary and whose feedback may be harder to base on the meeting of objective and functional requirements.

As such, the craftsman alternative buffers against some of the harsh and painful experiences of having work cut and rejected. It demands that reasoning and transparency be brought back into the evaluation of work, making it less the outcome of individual subjective opinions or ‘taste’ (Gronow, 1997). Thus the craftsman identity allows workers to step away from the reliance on others’ valuations of work and derive meaning from more objective understandings of the standards and measures of quality of work. Mobilising the craftsman as the aspirational identity, then, allows individual to diminish some of the harsh effects of the Game by reducing the power of others to evaluate work and therefore influence affectual outcomes such as pain, disappointment, and anger. The craftsman aspirational identity allows workers to continue playing the Game and potentially be recognised as an ideal Alpha worker (as the autonomous, creative, loving craftsman) while alleviating and escaping some of the more emotionally challenging experiences of the Game. At the same time, it appears to maintain some of the other features of the game – a love for and commitment to one’s work, the much desired autonomy and personal meaning derived from work. Given that several identified through the discourse of the craftsman in their talk, this reflects changes in the field of positions regarding what it means to be a creative worker at Alpha. This act of dis-identifying with the identity of the artist and instead aspiring to that of the craftsman further reduces the need to distance selves from work and encourages workers to stay at Alpha by mitigating negative experiences of work and self.

### ***Escape or What?***

There are two questions that arise here – is the craftsman an adequate resistance to the potentially exploitative nature of the Game? And is the recent revival of the discourse and movement towards ‘craftwork’ as an idealised form of work a healthy development in the field of creative work and beyond? The answer to these questions may be

somewhat overlapping. Perhaps to answer the first question we need to examine whether the craftsman identity offers enough for individuals to escape the subjugation and exploitation of the creative worker.

As Inkson (1987) notes - craftsmanship retains a personal meaning in work and 'engrosses and delights the worker' (p. 164). As we have seen such experiences of delight are also synonymous with the artist identity as feelings of 'love' are expressed when work is recognised and positively valued by others. However, such experiences are often momentary and fleeting when related to the elusive identity of the artist where affirmation of the identity is based on playing the highly precarious socio-political Game with the self and where such positive emotional experiences are elusive. Craftsmanship is somewhat more loosely coupled to the Game – making workers less reliant on others' appraisal of their work, rather having more articulable or objective means for evaluation of their work or their skill. The ability to cope with bad evaluation of one's work is also strengthened by the security found from the idea that skills can be developed despite being less than ideal as workers 'craft' themselves and their skills through working or training harder at their desired skillset. The artist has less room for manoeuvre here as her skill is constructed as something she just 'has', perhaps allowing failure to be attributed to the self more directly rather than any inadequacy in skillsets that can be worked on. Thus the collapsed relation between self and work encourages negative self-experiences in moments when the desired identity of the artist is not affirmed by others. Constructing failure as a quality of failed execution of skills (via craftsmanship) rather than as a failure of the self may help workers to cope and even alleviate some of the negative emotional experiences as experienced from the Game played for affirmation as an artist. This also has the potential to divorce the collapsed selves from work – returning a sense of control over the self's relation to work but also on the outcomes of work by enabling a distancing of self from work.

These means of coping reach beyond the micro-individual level as they are observable across different individuals and configure as an alternative discourse and identity around craftsmanship. This discourse works to challenge the ideology of the great artist as a dominant way for constructing creative workers' selves. This movement or collective resistance observed at Alpha may ultimately displace the idealised identity of the artist and replace it with a craftsman. The question is then one of whether craftsmanship can be a viable and healthy alternative for the ways creative workers construct their sense of self and identity, and whether such an alternative is an adequate

escape from the pitfalls and demands of the Game which may be observed at creative work organisations. Craft certainly has the potential to offer many of the qualities which Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) consider a part of ‘good’ creative work. The craftworker at Alpha retains autonomy and control for how their work is to be completed, they are interested and involved in their work, can develop their self-esteem through work, experience feelings of self-realisation as well as enjoy the security of being employed on a permanent contract – bypassing most of the job precarity that proliferates the creative industries. According to Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), these features of creative work form the basis of ‘good’ creative work that may be rewarding for both workers and industry alike through the balance between social justice and individual experience in the socio-political spheres that creative workers operate and beyond. Working with the self as a craftsman may also increase enjoyment from work by mitigating negative emotional experiences and thereby increasing individuals’ well-being at work, returning a pride and dignity to work as well as increasing the meaningfulness of work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Hodson, 2001). It is this very argument that Richard Sennett (2008) attempts to develop in *The Craftsman*. A return to craftsmanship, Sennett argues, is a resistance to the machine world and a return to our instincts and interests in doing ‘good’ work through craftsmanship – which he defines as a desire to ‘do a job well for its own sake’ (p. 9). Indeed, in his working of this craftsman ethic the quality of the work completed becomes priority over aspects of self or questions of social status of an individual.

For Maccoby (1976) the craftsman is the antithesis of the gamesman – craft, a relation of self to knowledge, skills, and personal limits resist the ambitious desires of the zealous gamesman. Motivation is derived from the work itself and the challenge of working not of money or other means. The craftsman allows us to resist against the overly competitive nature of the game as the craftsman ‘does not compete against others as much as he does against nature, materials, and especially his own standards of quality’ (Maccoby, 1976, p. 53). As such, the emergence of a discourse on craftsmanship at Alpha and a return to craftwork attitudes and meanings of work more broadly may challenge some of the dominant capitalistic systems built on a model around competition for scarce resources (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). In her study of craft workers and craft revival in the creative economy Luckman (2015) explored the experiences of workers in a contemporary craft economy – one built around this idea of craftsmanship, showing its potential for organising creative work against the capitalistic interests of



mass producers. As an alternative beyond the creative industries, Tweedie and Holley (2016) develop on Sennett's vision for the craftsman by arguing that craft and doing 'quality work' can be a source of meaning and motivation for work, even in work identified as socially undesirable. A dedication and commitment to their work as craft can 'challenge coercive and rationalistic controls to deliver higher-quality work' (p. 1897). It is possible from these conceptualisations of craftsmanship to see it as an alternative way of organising work - especially creative work. Yet the question still remains if this is enough to mitigate against the exploitative nature of the Game at Alpha, or is it a guise that develops as a means for coping with emotionally charged experiences but fails to change conditions or means of subjugation and exploitation of workers.

What we know is that conditions for creative work at Alpha are less than those ideals often promoted as just. For example, workers at Alpha are expected to work long-hours and are offered less pay than other companies within the video games industry. The workers admit this and willingly justify this away through their emphasis on their ability to do the work they enjoy and position themselves as being in the privileged position of being able to work with what they love vis-à-vis others who are not. The demand for these affectual relations and their articulations of love can work to blind them (as much perhaps as they blind themselves) to these conditions and also blur boundaries between life and work so as to harness aspects of life as part of the corporate agenda (Fleming, 2014). The promise of self-realisation through work has long been mobilised by management and management scholars as a means for controlling workers and turning them into 'self-disciplined capitalist subjects' (Anthony, 1977; Hanlon, 2017). The Game works to use this to its very advantage – individuals' aspirations and desires and self-projects are brought directly into their work, collapsing the self into work and allowing one to equate to the other under the system. While the craftsman does some work to alleviate challenging emotional experiences and the rollercoaster of the artist's identity work, it does not replace the underlying use of self-realisation as a mechanism for strengthening commitment to work and the blinding of workers to some means of exploitation. One such example of this continued exploitation is management's encouragement of workers to work on potential projects as 'hobbies' outside hours of work, encourage workers to share these with management and the organisation only for them to be appropriated and later owned by the owner company – without worker monetary compensation for their ideas but the "*fame and glory*" (as well as enjoyment perhaps) of doing this 'good' work.

This addresses a fundamental problem with what is going on at Alpha. From one perspective worker's express fulfilment and meaning from their work (although sometimes fleeting) and find ways to cope that restores or maintains their well-being. On the other hand, workers struggle with aspects of work – the challenges of the negative emotional experiences due to the collapse between self and work, the changing conditions of work to more standardised approaches, the lower pay and long working hours as well as a general blurring of boundaries between life and work where work is constructed as fun, familial and incorporates their hobbies and interests outside of work (that is, life). The craft alternative seems to only address one of these struggles – that of negative work experiences, and in that that it is questionable if it succeeds or is enough to change this system at that or whether this is yet another way for capitalism to persist despite itself (Fleming, 2014). Craftsmanship, rather than disrupting the existing system of relations between management and worker, may be all but a hollow, yet pleasing, buttress to the system of power relations that demands love and long hours from workers. This kind of decaf resistance (Contu, 2008) maintains a nice illusion of resistance (as well as workers sense of wellbeing perhaps) that only seeks to maintain power relations that favour of management rather than challenging them (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). There is therefore a serious question about whether craft can offer the adequate means for critical and reflexive resistance or whether the increased ability to self-manage under as a craftsman only works in an illusory capacity – ultimately enchanting workers further into the existing system of relations as they remain committed and 'in love' with their work as craftsmen. The capturing of 'hearts and minds' is maintained as an essential part of creative work at Alpha – reinforced by the idealisation of the autonomous, creative and loving worker. Ultimately I propose that these idealisations do not offer a space for workers to be reflexive about the demands imposed on them or their conditions of work. By maintaining these ideals and supporting them through the structure of the Game workers' opportunities to organise creative work differently and resist against the affectual demands on them are diminished. Instead these ideals are maintained and strengthened through both the aspirational identities of the artist and the craftsman. The ultimate question then becomes one that Cohen and Taylor (1992) so eloquently first asked, and attempted to answer all those years ago - can we really escape? And how might these attempts look in everyday life? In the next chapter I will summarise our wonderings through the experiences at and of Alpha as well as try to explore some of

escape attempts and offer some potential ways for navigating creative work and the Game.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter I have positioned the Game as part of the growing literature on the capturing of subjectivity at work and the incorporation of affect as part of work and means of controlling and (self-)disciplining workers. I argue that workers are not passive in experiencing these demands but are active in their construction. Through micro-resistance workers make attempts to redefine the aspirational identities that define who or what is considered the ideal Alpha worker. At Alpha we see this shift from the image of the ‘artist’ to that of the ‘craftsman’. The discourse of craftsmanship connects to the ideologies of the early industrial era and of maintaining love and meaning in work against the tides of alienation that resulted from machine labour (Blauner, 1964). Making sense of such moves allows us to understand the way in which workers navigate the selves, work and emotions of the Game. While such a shift may lessen the negative emotions experienced due to a perceived increase in objectivity it may not be enough to resist and escape the entanglement of selves and work in the creative work carried out at Alpha, which may continue to challenge and exploit workers and serve organisational over worker interests.

## 10. Navigating Creative Work Terrains

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Creative workers are one group of workers, more than any other, said to exemplify the challenges of contemporary working life (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Yet until now we have seen a dearth of empirical material exploring creative workers' experiences in the creative organisation. The purpose of this thesis has been to address this lack of empirical research and develop the understanding of these experiences. In doing so this thesis has looked at how workers experience themselves and their work at Alpha and some of the challenges these experiences led to. In doing so, this study offers the opportunity to address how contemporary creative workers navigate themselves and their work in the face of these challenges, but also to question how creative work is organised. Alpha is a very rich site where we see individuals engage in gameplay with their selves and identities with the hopes of reaching an idealised state of love and meaningful work. Therefore, by examining this case in detail I develop the understandings of creative workers' experiences and navigating attempts but also theorise some of the implications of these for other creative workers and the way creative work is organised more broadly.

This chapter will begin by summarising the encounters at Alpha and the theoretical development of these findings. It will then seek to address the problems facing creative workers, how they navigate these, and if this navigation suffices with respect to aspects of their well-being and subjugation. The chapter will then cover the alternative ways for organising creative work that might be gleaned from our understandings of the experiences at Alpha. In considering the ways in which creative work has been organised at Alpha, I will in this chapter also try and address the implications that this might have for the organisation of creative work elsewhere but also its implications for contemporary work more broadly. Lastly this chapter will consider the limitations of this work and where potential future research in creative organisations can make a difference.

### *Looking Back*

From the encounters with workers' narratives at Alpha we can surmise that creative workers are faced with pressures to incorporate selves and affect in work, work long hours for lower pay, and face a return to the factory floor with threats of the standardisation and routinisation of their work. Such pressures have been argued to

reduce meaningfulness work and cause workers to choose to distance selves from work (Blauner, 1964; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992). Yet what we have seen at Alpha is that through discourses and ideologies of the prized individual and through structures enabling workers to construct themselves through work (such as the Game) creative workers have the opportunities to find love and meaning in work and therefore avoid the necessity to distance selves and render their work meaningless. The Game allows creative workers at Alpha a means through which to navigate their work in the hopes of achieving the self-realisation that workers so desire (McRobbie, 1998; Taylor, 2010, 2013; Taylor and Littleton, 2013). However, in doing so they face the struggle for identity-affirmation, an affirmation which is largely competitive and fleeting and based on an elusive identity of an artist. In attempting to cope with some of the difficult emotions experienced resulting from failures to have the aspired-to-identity affirmed workers navigate towards alternative discourses of creative work – namely that of the craftsman.

The craftsman identity, in comparison to the artist identity, offers a potential for stability in emotions and sense of self of the creative worker. This occurs through stabilising the means through which work is valued – making the outcomes of work more transparent through a more articulable and trainable skill base used by the craftsman to do their work (that is, it may be established through shared practices and training that can be objectively followed). This emphasises more the skills of the worker than necessarily the product of their work in affirming themselves as the ‘ideal creative worker’. That said, valuations of products also shift from the subjective assessment of aesthetic qualities of work (artist) towards the more objective assessment of functional requirements (craftsman) therefore placing less importance on others’ subjective (and political) valuations of work and more on the individuals’ development of trainable skills. Therefore, experiences of painful and ambivalent emotions can be reduced by repositioning the ideal worker as one who does not just ‘have’ the skills (artist) but can develop their skills (craftsman). The craftsman also offers new reasoning for failures – for example a craftsman may justify bad work products by their failure to choose the right methods or due to lacking necessary skills rather than not *being* good enough. The self is positioned outside of this work outcome so that the relation of self to work is not collapsed but rather managed. This allows the self not to be directly positioned as the reasoning for work failures or rejections. This change in target aspirational identity offers workers the ability to self-manage while retaining their opportunities to work on

themselves as the autonomous, creative and loving worker at Alpha (craftwork still encourages an imprint of the self in terms of space for a signature of the self in work). In doing so workers remain in the Game with the opportunity to experience love and meaning for their work, all while slipping the painful experiences of not *becoming* the great artist that comes as a risk of navigating the precarious, ambiguous, and highly subjective path to self-realisation.

While the perceived objectivity of the identity of the craftsman seems appealing – it is not yet clear whether this is enough to escape the socio-political nature of creative work. As Bourdieu (1993) argues, aspired to positions are shifting and it may be that competition to be affirmed as the craftsman may also become elusive and be less comforting than it seems. The opportunities for self-management that the craftsman offers are perhaps promising in terms of well-being. Self-distancing from work at times is perhaps necessary for the well-being workers (Kahn, 1990). And while a return to the discourse of craftsmanship at work may serve to re-instill work with the meaning (Blauner, 1964; Luckman, 2015; Sennett, 2008; Tweedie and Holley, 2016) there is a question whether this is sufficient to raise worker reflexivity to their conditions of work and also the encroachment of work into life. The question remains whether the way creative work is organised at Alpha, is sufficient for workers or whether it simply encourages their own subjugation to managerial and capitalistic interests.

### ***Terrains for Creative Workers***

There are here several terrains which creative workers need to navigate. Firstly, it is their self-projects, which have been brought in as a direct part of production. This serves their own, but also organisational interests, so far as workers can work towards the promise of self-realisation and organisations can use the products of these activities to accumulate wealth. In navigating their self-projects workers do not always succeed in being affirmed as their aspired-to-identities. This is common in other work settings and has been recognised by other scholars (Kenny, 2010, 2012; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). In creative work at Alpha however, the here-to dominant aspired-to-identity is that of an agentic and great artist who is reliant on their unique disposition – something they ‘have’ that is synonymous with their sense of self to produce works that are ‘creative’. This idea is reinforced by the dominant discourses of autonomy and fantasies of the artist that echo those of the broader discourses on creative work that construct the ideal creative worker as an enterprising and mythic creative genius. At Alpha this

identity is elusive and strongly contested making workers insecure and anxious and selves more salient as workers struggle to construct themselves in aspired-to-positions. Yet some succeed and find meaning and love, but this is only in fleeting moments as the next one they have to struggle to achieve this state again. This experience of insecurity is harmful for worker well-being, sense of self, and can lead to alienation, discontent, suffering, and exit from the organisation (Hodson, 2001).

In navigating this terrain workers also have to contend with the socio-political context of creative work. One which is contested and highly subjective. This requires that individuals play the Game that offers the promise to self-realise by incorporating aspects of their selves in the processes and outcomes of work. In some instances, this implies that the self can become collapsed in work so that it equates to work. Yet in other instances selves can be managed and distanced as we have seen in other studies of workers that I have compared to workers at Alpha (cf. Casey, 1995; Hochschild, 1983; Kunda, 1992). While workers attempt to move towards the ability to create space for selves beyond work through the shift in aspirational identity to that of the craftsman – this is not done by all workers and many still suffer the very ‘painful’ experiences that amount from this socio-political Game. Self-management (through self-distancing for example) is one activity which could aid in alleviating the experience of darker emotions resulting from creative work. Worker reflexivity to the risks involved and darker outcomes of the collapsing of the self into work would help spur some changes in the ways workers approach work (for example - moving towards more stable identities such as the craftsman). Yet despite these shifts by workers towards sources for a more stable sense of self and a distancing in the relation between self and work, selves and subjectivity are maintained as an important part of creative work.

The last terrain to navigate is that which addresses the demands for selves and affect as part of creative work. The way the Game organises work is that it demands that selves and emotions are incorporated into creative work. By positioning the ideal worker at Alpha as one who is autonomous, creative and loving and by harnessing worker’s desires for identity affirmation as part of the Game calls for workers to integrate their self-projects as part of work. Requiring a signature of the self, to be recognisable to significant others, which is strengthened in light of contested positions such as that of the artist, the Game collapses the sense of self with work so that the two become equitable. This increases salience of selves but also challenges opportunities for reflexivity and distancing. Worker reflexivity regarding work conditions for example is

thwarted by the focus on giving the best presentation of work (and self) to others and by a preoccupation with reaching ideal states of love and meaning. For example, workers forgo higher wages for opportunities to realise as the identity they aspire to. This cycle is strengthened by temporary successes which elucidate commitment to work and the Game while blinding workers to their conditions. These temporary and fleeting moments of love also blind workers to considerations of how these processes may be a part of organisational control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010). It also reinforces a commitment to work conditions that are not favourable to life, that is long working hours, appropriation of hobby activities and projects by the organisation and other general blurring of boundaries between work and life (Fleming, 2014). The question to address with this last terrain is whether workers are able to garner the reflexivity about their situation in order to successfully manage the balance between self-realisation and self-exploitation so often seen in the creative industries (Taylor, 2010).

These three terrains progress in the degree to which they affect individuals and the temporality of these effects. In the first terrain requiring short term emotion work the concerns are immediate and personal – how can workers alleviate painful experiences? The second terrain addresses personal concerns but on a more prolonged term – how can workers continue to do creative work and manage the relation of a self to work that allows one to achieve positive emotions (love and meaning) and avoid those more painful experiences consistently? The last terrain addresses the more structural and systemic issues relating to creative work at Alpha – how do workers change the conditions to avoid subjugation and exploitation in creative working.

It seems from the empirical material introduced by this thesis that workers at Alpha are addressing the first terrain with the second – by developing the craftsman identity as a kind of defensive identity to the painful experiences. With regard to the third terrain there is very little to show at Alpha about worker reflexivity regarding this issue. The Game has ensured that workers stay committed to its ambiguous and demanding structures while providing little room for challenging these. This is perhaps the area that workers can do the most to become aware of and attempt to resist in order to change their circumstances. Escaping existing demands of creative work as set around selves and emotions may be difficult given the intricate and tight weaving of individuals' interests with organisational interests. Resistance may be further thwarted by the fact that idealised identities and selves are fed into Alpha by the broader societal discourses on creativity and creative selves – making the allure of these selves more than simply an



organisational discourse that can be easily surpassed with alternative discourses. These discourses that challenge, for example, fantasies of the artist at Alpha would need to also challenge broader ideals about the mythical creative genius and perhaps the enterprising and agentic hero of contemporary society. Alternatives to each of these would be more collective views of working and of creativity. The craftsman focused on the production of 'good' work as in Sennett's (2008) description, to be one focused on the social value of craftwork rather than it as a source of distinction could be an alternative way to think about creative work. This discourse would need to consider the craftsman and craftwork as something belonging to the social, so that self and emotions would return to the individual and for their non-work lives.

There is some uncertainty about how this might be achieved and if these delineations are even possible. The complication of self, meaning and work is one that is difficult to untangle. Workers seek meaning from work so to avoid the alienation felt in meaningless work (Blauner, 1964). Here I argue, similar to Driver (2017), that it is the involvement of the self that gives meaning to work for workers. Therefore, removing self from work entirely may not be the solution either. Instead of tackling the problem of meaningful work, perhaps the solution could be one of addressing the way it is organised and managed. Creative organisations should do more to ensure workers are working under equitable conditions – including fair hours and pay. An awareness and critical stance towards historic discourses around creative work by both organisations and individuals, for example suffering as an acceptable part of creative work, could improve worker conditions if organisations act to change these or workers collectively organise to resist demands on their time and wages.

Ultimately there is some doubt about and scepticism in the literature about how workers can organise to improve their conditions (cf. Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fleming, 2014) and whether there is hope to escape the demands of the Game and where workers can find themselves 'out of play, and can assemble [their] identity in peace or with new and more powerful symbolic resources' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992, p. 112). During the time I was at Alpha, I observed little space for this kind of activity – where work became (often openly) a part of workers' lives, often following them out of the physical space of the office and into their home lives. As we saw in chapters five and six, workers took pride in working long hours - including weekends, sharing their hobby projects with the organisation and even organising their lives around work. In this way they are active in rather than resistant to reducing the space between work and life. Those

leaving work at 16.30 were frowned upon and periods of ‘crunch’ were normalised and explained away as part of the conditions in the industry. In this regard the construction of the ideal Alpha worker disciplines workers to commit to rather than resist such practices while also eliminating the spaces and discourse for self-distancing, critical reflexivity towards practices and the organisation of a collective resistance. So while coping through the defensive identity of the craftsman may have given workers sufficient reprieve from difficult and challenging experiences of creative work at Alpha, there was little to indicate any more substantial or collective resistances to work conditions or the way creative work was organised.

### ***Broader Implications and Future Directions***

This study has sought to understand how creative workers experience themselves and their work in the creative organisation. In studying the goings on at Alpha Games through a seven-month organisational ethnography I am able to develop in this thesis some descriptive and theoretical understandings of the entanglement of work, self and emotions at Alpha during this time. This working does not only allow us to theorise aspects around creative work at Alpha but also extend this to broader contexts.

One such observation can be made about the role of broader discourses in the formation of the creative self and the organisation of creative work. At Alpha these factors were closely informed by the broader discourses identified in chapters two and three around creativity and contemporary work. Creativity at Alpha was seen as something positive and desirable, with creative selves as distinct and possessing special qualities. An individualistic orientation, placing the individual as the source of meaning and success for the organisation also echoed late modern ideals and discourses (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991). In a similar way individuals were constructed and idealised as autonomous and enterprising workers who are responsible for constructing themselves but also should assimilate responsibility for the consequences of these constructions (Bauman, 2001; Contu, 2008; Hanlon, 2014; Rose, 1998) a message that is particularly pervasive in the context of creative work (O’Connor, 2010; De Peuter, 2014; Taylor, 2015). Other discourses about insecurity and suffering, that are normalised by discourses and images of creative work are also adopted at Alpha. Precarity, as an issue in the creative industries, seems here not only to be an issue of employment, but rather one of identity and self even under conditions of stable employment. The socio-political dynamics of the ‘Warhol economy’ criticised by De Peuter (2014) as consisting of the

‘lack of a safety net, income insecurity, an erratic schedule, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and non- work time, and the absence of collective representation’ (p. 33) go beyond these aspects to include the precarious and concerning ways selves and identities are constructed in the creative organisation.

A place to start examining and questioning these issues further is through the exploration of the way individuals’ interests and organisational interests are merging to serve predominantly capitalistic ends (Contu, 2008; Heelas, 2002). In particular explorations of the ways selves and emotions are brought in as part of work could expand to other creative work settings to help us understand if this is a growing condition of contemporary creative work. Similarly, other non-creative work settings or knowledge work settings could offer further insights into the way selves and emotions are brought into relations with work through organisational discourses. Considering the terrains for navigating creative work, it is possible to see these as different levels of analysis. Each could be used to understand different navigations of individuals and the organisation of work. More specifically, new theories and imaginaries could be developed to challenge the existing ways creativity is organised that leads to the conditions of work observed at Alpha. This could offer potential ways to challenge dominant discourses that normalise worker sacrifices and suffering but also those that connect creativity with the distinction of the individual. The means for challenging this existing way of thinking is grander and more radical than I am able to offer here, but none-the-less I think are possible, worthwhile, and necessary. Further research could develop what these imaginaries for creative work might be and work to challenge the way ‘the sociosymbolic network in which we and our way of life make sense’ (Contu, 2008, p. 375) – or in the ways creative work and creative selves currently make sense.

A specific area where this work might make important strides with regards to these broader issues facing the organisation of creative work is the consideration of how gender and minority groups are constructed in creative work (something that has begun being addressed by the likes of Alacovska, 2017; Duberley, Carrigan, Ferreira, and Bosangit, 2017; Krings, 2006; Larsen, 2017; Luckman, 2015; and Taylor, 2010). One limitation of this research is the lack of attention on issues of how mechanisms such as the Game may reinforce power relations that include some groups and exclude others. From a gender perspective it could be possible to use the metaphor to explore how certain groups of individuals are privileged in their ability to construct idealised identities compared to others. Similarly future research could explore how the idealised

worker at the creative organisation is used to define the limits of who or what can be considered creative (as is explored by Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, and Carter, 2010), with more specific attention on gender and other underprivileged groups.

There are several further aspects for implications for creative work and contemporary work more broadly. Firstly the discussion around the discourse of craft needs further critical research. As a means for coping with everyday life difficulties craftwork seems promising yet it is unclear if this is a viable and respectful way for work to be organised or if the return to earlier discourses of craft are simply another means through which ‘capitalism persists despite itself’ (Fleming, 2015). With regards to creative work it could be that craft is just another way to maintain creative workers in the binary between self-realisation and self-exploitation (Kline et al., 2003; De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Taylor, 2010). Despite good recent efforts so far (Luckman, 2015; Sennett, 2008; Tweedie and Holley, 2016) the discussion around craft could go further and connect with the writings of many of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars on the topic and its relation to work (Anthony, 1977; Blauner, 1964; Mills, 1956). Secondly, the metaphor of the Game, as developed here, could be understood in the context of other creative and non-creative workplaces. In some respect this Bourdiesien development of gameplay has already been begun by Kalfa, Wilkinson, and Gollan (2017) in their forthcoming publication exploring academic gameplay. Further sites covering the contexts of creative work, digital work, and knowledge work more broadly could be studied, especially those in knowledge work that rely on the self-forming subject and identities as a means of control. Lastly, emotions in relation to selves and work need to be studied further. As argued by this thesis the relation and interaction of these three concepts has important implications for contemporary workers – and these need to be further explored and understood in order to help workers deal with the challenges of their contemporary working lives.

This thesis endeavoured to understand how workers experience themselves and their work in the creative organisation. It also set out to uncover challenges faced by contemporary creative workers and how they navigate these in light of competing narratives and discourses of creative work. By conducting an organisational ethnography at Alpha Games I was able to answer some of these concerns. More specifically the ideals produced by the discourses of creative work at Alpha do not align with the everyday work experiences of creative workers. Despite this misalignment of

ideals and everyday experiences, creative workers at Alpha were not inclined to estrange or distance themselves from their work but rather remarkably do the opposite. Their expressions of love and meaning from work encouraged a construction of the self as collapsed in as a part of work. This puzzling discovery lead to further examination of the social and structural conditions that enabled this. Through the theorisation of the Game with the Self I explored how creative work is in fact caught up in a socio-political game where workers attempt to construct themselves in line with aspirational identities in the eyes of others. Their successes in this pursuit lead to temporal feelings of love and meaning. Yet these are not sustained but punctuated by failures which are painful and difficult for workers. Attempting to cope, workers return to an earlier discourse promoting craft ideals and the identity of the craftsman. While these attempts helped them in navigating moments of pain as well as a more sustained act of self-management, it has not so far enabled them to resist the systemic failures surrounding the way creative work is organised that encourages insecurity and precarious work but also unfavourable conditions of work that may continue to compromise the well-being of workers.

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## Appendix: Further Methodological and Practical Considerations

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This appendix elaborates and adds to the existing methodological and practical dimensions of this thesis. It does so by more closely examining my own practices in working with the empirical material in what I consider a more ‘confessional’ reflexive style. In doing so I hope to introduce the reader to my own navigation of the multitude of routes afforded to me by the empirical material. While I am resistant to saying there was a ‘best way’ to make these movements, I do believe in the quality that working with the material in a reflexive way offers. In the below descriptive account we are able to see some of the ways in which the theory of hermeneutics plays out in practice. Methodologically it allows for the often omitted and unspoken processes of data analysis to be brought into view. Similarly, it is my belief that research in the qualitative field should have an underlying purpose which drives its activity. In this appendix I will consider more concretely how I reconnect my work with the more practical achievements it hopes to accomplish.

### *Hermeneutics in Practice*

The alethic hermeneutic approach places less emphasis on arriving at the exact meaning of the inspiration for interpretation (i.e. the author) but rather at interpreting these matters in a politically and culturally relevant way that reveals a new narrative or metaphor (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). In doing so it moves away from attempts at objectivity and acknowledges the interpreters *lifeworld* in the hermeneutic process of interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). To put this into practice and establish a complete picture of an interpreter’s lifeworld would be next to impossible as we are all influenced by a plethora of conditions that we are to largely varying degrees conscious of. However, it is possible to describe some of the processes in relative detail in order to provide a small glimpse into my own engagement with my empirical material and its development from new understandings to an integrated theory.

Such a narrative begins prior to my knowledge of Alpha’s existence, and in the depths of my pre-understanding of experiences of creative work. In my life I have encountered only a small number of people who I would recognise as creative workers in the sense that I describe in this thesis. My father was one such person, working as a contract musician in my early childhood - I saw in my youth how he was driven, due to

the precarity of the work and the need to provide for a family, to change careers to non-creative vocations. Others I had talked to prior to entering Alpha (I did two pilot interviews prior to beginning my study at Alpha) also spoke of similar precarity and difficulties in establishing themselves as creatives. This sense of precarity was confirmed to me in my early readings of the literature on the creative industries which highlighted these same issues. My early impressions of this precarity and sense of struggle for workers aided me in developing my project in its initial stages. During these early formulations I noticed and wrote about these issues as concerning discourses of creativity – that these were predominantly positive and that more critical stances towards creativity for creative workers were rarely taken (with a few exceptions – cf. Prichard, 2002; Tuori and Vilén, 2011). Having also previously studied identity and more micro level constructions of discourses from a critical perspective this sparked a curiosity about how might these concepts and ideas interact in the everyday experiences of creative workers. As well as their interactions I was also curious to know if there were darker experiences of creative work which had, until then, failed to be brought to light in any great depth.

This early interaction with the theory and my developing curiosities meant that I could go into Alpha with a clear research interest in mind and a somewhat attuned focus for what I thought might be interesting to discover. My initial interactions with the organisation and the data were shaped by these thoughts – while remaining open to other ideas. One of the first sources of data at Alpha was paying attention to the way things were organised and the way people spoke during those early days. This included paying attention to visual details in the physical space but also to the dress, body language and movements through the building. All indicated that Alpha was a modern organisation which attempted to embody the ‘cool’ of new media work organisations described by Gill (2002) and Ross (2003). This affirmed my interest in the organisation’s role in shaping the experiences of creative workers. During my informal discussions, and interviews with individuals, therefore, I attempted to focus on both individual and organisational dimensions of their experiences and encouraged me to sharpen my interview questions to address these aspects – addressing equally ‘creativity and the individual’ and ‘creativity and the organisation’. Further connecting my previous understanding regarding the lack of darker experiences of creative work to this I made sure to also include questions that allowed interviewees to address what I called ‘issues with creativity and creative work’.

Early workings of my theoretical ideas began already during the fieldwork period. While remaining quite open to a variety of experiences and keeping the general feel of the discussions fairly varied I began to get a sense that there was something those I spoke with were struggling with at Alpha. On the surface everyone seemed happy and congenial – but in the one-to-one interviews people began sharing stories of struggles with failures as well as more elaborate tales of their love for their work. These were my first encounters with what I later considered the ‘rollercoaster’ swings between being recognised as the aspirational identity they desired themselves to be and failing to do so. These initial ideas spilled over into my working through all the data I had collected after my fieldwork time had come to an end. Over the six months I have completed 41 one-to-one interviews varying in length from 40 to 100 minutes and observed 11 formal events including company meetings and workshops, and hung around informally taking observations – all in all amounting to over 200 pages of fieldnotes from observations and 200 pages of notes during interviews. I was able to organise and keep track of this material and all the ‘characters’ in the story through detailed spreadsheets with names, locations, dates and times as well as job titles and estimations of people’s ages.

Transcribing all audio material from the interviews myself was another opportunity to start developing my pre-understandings into understandings. As I listened and compared notes I could return to the moment of the interview and reflect on the tone of the speaker but also the major themes that emerged as they talked. I kept track of these in further notes where I tried to tag a thematic category to a corresponding time on the audio track. To help me further build on this initial analysis I decided to use a data analysis software – namely NVivo. Having loaded all of the transcribed interviews and fieldnotes into NVivo I began to first read and code all of this material in a very open manner – without strict rules or guidelines. This resulted in 123 ‘nodes’ or themes which I then loosely organised into the lead categories of ‘self’, ‘relationship to other’, ‘conditions-experience of work’, ‘organisation’, ‘creativity’, and ‘concepts’. One major understanding that emerged here was how important the sense of ‘self’ was in most of the interview accounts and even in some observations. More specifically, self-reflexive stories dominated my interviews and individuals consistently referred to themselves in their experiences by using the pronoun ‘me’. I began to consider that identity is here only partly the question – and it dawned on me that this had much more to do with experiences and constructions of the self when interviewees referred to their work as a *‘piece of me’* or *‘me on a plate’*.

The earlier encounters with the rollercoaster experiences led me to theorise that these were interactions with implications for the self but which were embroiled in the complex organisational environment – so that discourses and ideals constructed in the organisation encouraged these experiences. The early theorisations of the Game began to emerge and I started to direct my reading of the data around experiences and possible explanations for these. At the same time, being a fan of Alvesson and Kärreman's *Mystery as Method* (2007, 2011) approach to research, I began to ask myself – what is surprising here? The answer was the mystery of love. Why, despite all the dark experiences of not achieving their desired state did workers continue to share a 'love for work'? I decided to use this as the central mystery in my thesis and to explain this with my development of the Game with the Self as the theoretical explanation for this unexpected observation. As I went through the data several more times the writing and the chapters themselves began to form. The writing itself I very much consider important to my work as it allowed me to address my purpose and objective with this work – the re-telling of the experiences of the creative workers and to organise these in a way that adds to the discussion and understanding of these experiences and their implications in a constructive way. Some of the sections had to be rethought and fine-tuned several times to do justice to this purpose and to fit into the overall argument. Another feature of my analysis was consulting theory throughout the development of the empirical chapters and in the preliminary sketching of the discussion parts. Theory helped me fine-tune my ideas which felt like bringing 'binoculars into sharper focus, or gradually adding light to a darkened room' (Weick, 1989, p. 518).

What this section has illustrated is that in practice the hermeneutic process is complex with no clear start or end point. It is difficult for any researcher to account for all the moments that have contributed to their theory development – but I hope that this reflexive story reveals a little more of my own navigation, as a creative researcher, through the multiple and complex possibilities for data analysis. The biggest contribution I can make from this story is to show that there are not always clear 'methods' one should adopt but rather that one should set a research purpose based on 'pre-understanding' in combination with theory and evaluate this as one navigates through the data. In some cases, this *may* and *should* change based on what you encounter but often keeping a stern grasp on your purpose can only guide and steer research towards producing a meaningful and rewarding story that connects to a wider social milieu.

### ***Practical Implications of this Research***

It was always my intention from the start to conduct this research in a way that speaks to a broader group or audience. This audience includes other creative work and organisation studies academics, but also those creative workers that find themselves in similar situations as the ones that I met at Alpha during my time in the field. I am able to achieve this by connecting the experiences of these people to the broader discourses and trends we observe in the social but also by communicating and sharing these connections in my writing of book chapters and papers. Through these means, my work will be able to reach an audience and in turn encourage this audience's reflexivity and re-imagination of creative work and creative workers' activities.

Following Habermas' writing on the pragmatics of communication, communication is not only the source of reaching understanding but a way of promoting actions through what he calls 'linguistically mediated interactions' where the speaker 'wants to produce prelocutionary effects on his opposite number with his speech acts' (Habermas, 1998, p. 129). In relation to my work I take these 'opposite numbers' to be those that read my speech acts (thesis, future papers and book chapters produced from this research). According to Habermas' argument – by writing these texts and distributing these to a desired audience you can help those in this audience reach a specific (and new) understanding (Habermas, 1998). Beyond these speech acts also encourage readers to act (think) differently and break away from that understanding and form new ways of thinking and acting. Pragmatically this means that changes are made at the individual level, and that broader changes can be seen as an aggregate of these individual readings of my texts. That is to say that the practical implications of my work are to inspire those that read it to be reflexive about their own and others' situations.

One example of this is how this thesis and future publications that are derived from its ideas may inspire academics studying creative work to look with more detail into certain issues (for example questions on the role of self in creative work, organisational politics in creative organisations, and the potential of craft as emancipatory or to question it as merely an illusory ideology). Another example of inspiring individuals' reflexivity is the creative workers themselves who may get access to and read my texts. Reading these texts may cause them to question their own circumstances and relations to their work. This reflexivity may encourage them to change the circumstances of their work or speak to others about these issues – creating further awareness and a ripple effect challenging the issues I have raised here. In order



to achieve this, it is important that I continue in distributing and writing about these ideas.

One publication is already complete in the form of a book chapter where I write about the role of the organisation in the self-work relationship of creative workers. Other work-in-progress texts questioning some of the ideas including ‘the normalisation of sacrifice in the creative industries’ and ‘craft as an ideology for organisational control’ may do more to inspire other creative work academics as well as creative workers themselves and their everyday practices. In reaching my desired audience of academics and creative workers it may help to publish in academic media (for academics) but also in media where practitioners themselves will have access to information – for example trade journals, newspapers, and through government agencies in the form of reports or government communications. Doing this will ensure a wider dissemination of my work and ideas beyond the ‘academic sphere’ which I consider as important to achieve practical accomplishments and to change conditions on the broader scale than just at the academic level (in line with Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen’s (2017) argument).

Ultimately what I hope for this text, and others originating from it, to achieve is to invite thinking around new imaginaries and alternatives for creative work. All those who interact with this text may be inspired to consider and re-consider their existing ways of thinking around issues concerning self, work, and emotions in the creative organisation – but also to imagine alternatives to what I have described at Alpha. How can creative work be organised in a way to discourage the Game with the Self and to reduce feelings of ‘pain’ and suffering in the creative workplace? How can we promote worker well-being and challenge or even eradicate the normalisation of suffering in creative work? My interest is in writing and developing further the thinking around these questions – and to inspire myself and others to theorise alternatives which make conditions and for workers and their everyday experiences of creative work better.